OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro GAMER

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WHY THE BRUISING SEQUEL STILL RULES THE STREETS

THE HISTORY OF EVERQUEST

THE EVOLVING STORY BEHIND A NEVER-ENDING MMORPG

INSIDE

THE SPECTRUM

HARDWARE EXCLUSIVE: INSIDE THE MISSION TO RESURRECT AN ICON OF 1980S COMPUTING

+

ZAXXON
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DONKEY KONG
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FACTORY PANIC
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SNATCHER

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PARKER BROS

FROM FROGGER TO Q*BERT: HOW MANY HAVE YOU PLAYED?

MICKEY MANIA

INSIDE JON BURTON'S HI-TECH 16-BIT PLATFORMER

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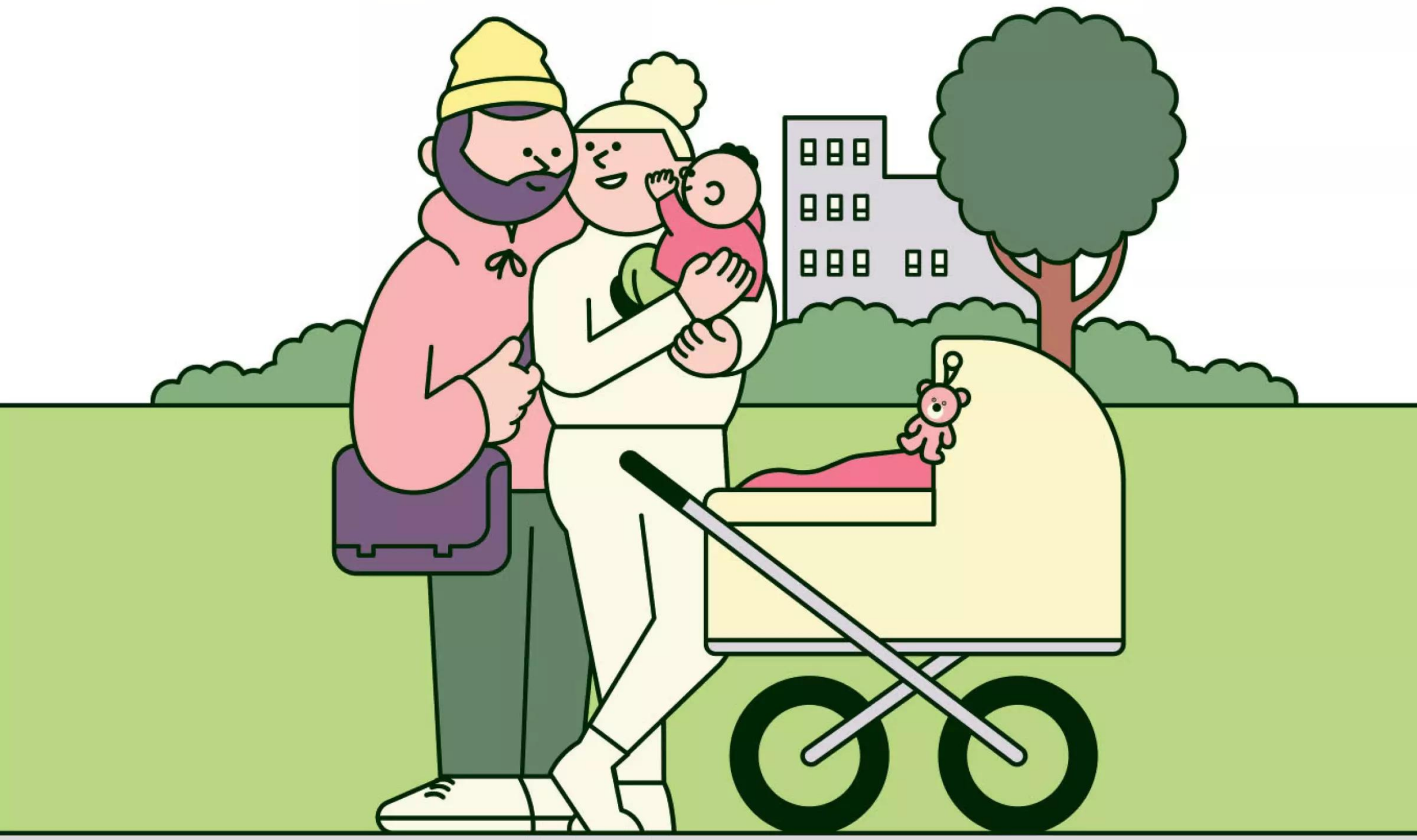

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LOADING...

The ZX Spectrum is arguably the most iconic and important home computer the UK has ever produced. It sparked playground arguments in the Eighties that are still being defended today, while all manner of delightfully inventive games were spawned from its humble innards. It's little wonder then that so many creatives have attempted to recapture the magic of Sir Clive Sinclair's marvellous micro in more recent years, and the latest modernisation of the iconic computer comes from Retro Games Ltd, a company that's no stranger to reinventing popular home micros.

Nick's been fortunate enough to have had plenty of hands-on time with The Spectrum and our exclusive interview will tell you everything you need to know about the incoming system and why it's worth keeping an eye on in the coming months.

Outside of our coverage of The Spectrum, we look back at the many great games by Parker Brothers, discover how a videogame adaptation of *Trivial Pursuit* saved Domark, and investigate the expansive history of the *EverQuest* series. Jon Burton chats to us about the creation of *Mickey Mania*, Doug Macrae shares his time making arcade games like *Ms Pac-Man*, while Jeremy Blaustein reveals what it was like working on Hideo Kojima's *Snatcher*. There's plenty more great articles in this issue, but I'll let you discover those for yourself.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE SPECTRUM ARCADE CONVERSION?

DARRAN JONES

I'm going for *Chase HQ*, Ocean's astonishing conversion is nearly as good as its marvellous Amstrad version.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Star Gladiator*
Favourite game of all time: *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast*

TIM EMPEY

Green Beret was pretty good. It was far better on the Commodore 64 though.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go
Currently playing: *Steelrising*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

NICK THORPE

The Speccy version of *Midnight Resistance* was always really impressive, with lovely chunky sprites and even a good rendition of the arcade music.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *Lumines II*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

ANDY SALTER

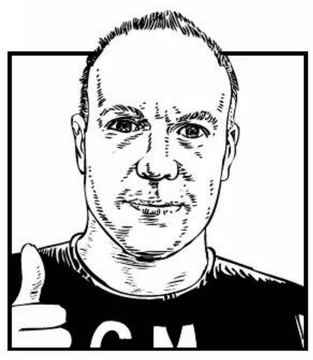
I spent hours trying to finish *Narc* with my school friends. The thing I remember the most is you have a rocket launcher, but you can also arrest people.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

ANDREW FISHER

Rainbow Islands – Graftgold's superb conversion is still incredibly playable.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *Yoshi's Story*
Favourite game of all time: *Wizball*

PAUL DRURY

Back in the day, it was *Commando*, which had more going for it than my C64 version. Now, it's Dave Tansley's brilliant port of *The Pit*.
Expertise: Atari lawsuits
Currently playing: *Mars 2010*
Favourite game of all time: *Sheep In Space*



GRAEME MASON

Gosh, that's like asking a favourite child. I think I'd have to go with Elite's *Bomb Jack*.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Buck Rogers: Countdown To Doomsday*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

RORY MILNE

There are more faithful Z80 ports, but I rate the Spectrum *Enduro Racer* higher just for bringing home the excitement of a Sega sprite scaler.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

PAUL ROSE

It has got to be *Space Harrier*.
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: *Super Mario Bros Wonder*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*

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Discover how Retro Games Ltd is modernising the popular home computer in its own unique style

Ultimate Guide: Snatcher
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The Retro Gamer Guide To: Parker Bros

Rory Milne takes on the challenge of rummaging through the publisher's vast catalogue of licensed games

» Blaze is all in on Lara Croft, bundling both the VS-R and EXP-R with *Tomb Raider Collection 1*.

EVERCADE EXPANDS

We go hands-on with Blaze's upcoming releases

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Nick's latest time-travelling adventure takes him to February 2008. What will he discover?

Having firmly established the Evercade as part of the retro-gaming ecosystem, Blaze is just about to begin its most extensive programme of hardware releases so far. It is not only replacing its core consoles, but adding two new budget handhelds and even an entirely new category to its product range. With that in mind, we warmly welcomed an invite to the Blaze office to take an early look at some of the new products on the horizon.

The new Evercade Alpha tabletop arcade units were available to try ahead of their planned launch in November for £229.99 each. The *Street Fighter* unit has been designed to resemble the classic *Street Fighter II: Champion Edition* cabinet, and includes that game plus *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*, *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* and the three *Street Fighter Alpha* games. The *Mega Man* edition has brand-new side art, and includes *Mega Man: The Power Battle* and *Mega Man 2: The Power Fighters*, *Final Fight*, *Strider*, *Carrier Air Wing* and *Knights Of The Round*. "We did consider doing Evercade-branded arcades, but I think if you want an arcade unit, you want that feel and that look, the original games, really," explains Blaze CEO Andrew Byatt.

» All of the hardware we saw on the day was pre-production, as you can see here.

First impressions of the Alphas are positive – they're nicely sized, and feel suitably durable. Though there wasn't a working version of the deluxe unit with Sanwa joystick and buttons for comparison, the standard controls felt nice and responsive when playing classics like *Street Fighter Alpha 2* and *Strider*. The units feature 4:3 displays, with a resolution of 1024x768. They were bright and clear, but the odd resolution of Capcom's arcade games combined with nearest neighbour pixel scaling did result in some uneven results across repeating pixel patterns – hopefully this can be resolved via video settings.

At the other end of the price scale, we got the chance to try out the new Technos and Atari Super Pocket systems, due for release in October at £49.99 each. The Technos edition is heavy on the beat-'em-ups and includes the arcade version of *Double Dragon*, previously absent from Technos Evercade cartridges. The Atari edition is loaded with 50 games, the most of any Super Pocket so far, and offers plenty of variety in terms of both the games and systems represented – 2600, 5200, 7800 and Lynx games feature alongside the arcade versions of *Asteroids*, *Crystal Castles* and *Missile Command*. It will be interesting to see how these devices fare with players, because just like the Capcom

» The 4:3 screen makes sense for arcade authenticity, but we'll be interested to see 16:9 and Tate Mode games on it.

» The Evercade Alpha is larger and more comfortable to play than the likes of the Astro City Mini.

and Taito Super Pockets they are compatible with Evercade cartridges, but unlike those they have a degree of crossover with the games available on cartridge.

Also on show were the new Evercade VS-R home console and Evercade EXP-R handheld, which are both set to launch on 30 August and will come bundled with *Tomb Raider Collection 1*. We weren't expecting any surprises from these machines, and spending some time with them didn't reveal any – Blaze had already announced that the VS-R will retail for £89.99 and feature no major changes, while the EXP-R will lose the built-in Capcom games and Mini-HDMI TV output of the original EXP, and therefore sell for a lower price of £99.99.

Speaking of *Tomb Raider*, Blaze's chief technology officer Ryan Dekker took the time to explain how recent projects like that cartridge and *Glover* have involved, "A lot of reverse engineering, working out how their compression algorithms and all of that stuff works, and then basically retooling it, creating new tools and reworking those games." For *Tomb Raider* specifically, he notes that, "The PlayStation versions of these games were notorious for having low gamma. So you could run into a cave, run out of flares, and be effectively soft locked, because you wouldn't be able to see anything. We've gone in and effectively added in a gamma control, so we've managed to boost the gamma for a lot of these games."

Of course, all of that is not to mention the forthcoming cartridges on show. The one that is most likely to have readers rejoicing is *The Bitmap Brothers Collection 2*, which includes games like *Magic Pockets* and *Gods* – and unlike the first collection, in their home-computer forms, which means it joins *Thalamus Collection 1* as a blue-labelled cart. We had a good time revisiting *FixEight* on *Toaplan Arcade 3*, which also includes the likes of *Batsugun* and *Truxton II*. *Data East Arcade 2* features the likes of *Super Burger Time*, *Midnight Resistance* and *Joe & Mac Returns*, but *The Cliffhanger: Edward Randy* stole our attention.

As always, we'll be giving the new hardware and cartridges full reviews when the time comes, so keep an eye out over the coming months. *

» Could we see deluxe editions of arcade cartridges with extra Evercade Alpha marquees? Time will tell.

» Sadly, this woodgrain limited-edition Atari Super Pocket sold out even before our visit. [Drat – Ed]

IN MEMORIAM: BRETT JONES

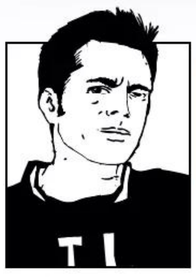
Videogame artist Brett Jones, who worked on *GoldenEye 007* and *Perfect Dark*, passed away in July. The sad news was confirmed on social media by his former colleague David Doak, who also added, "So much of what made *GE007* and *PD* special came from Brett's talent and rascal humour." Rare soon added its own tribute, saying that, "Brett was a big part of a small team, and helped make history that won't soon be forgotten by us here at Rare or entire generations of players."

Brett began his career at Rare in 1994 and worked on the two famous first-person shooters, and left both the company and the games industry in 2002. He went on to have a distinguished career in film and TV, earning BAFTA nominations for the BBC Formula 1 opening titles and *Code-Breakers: Bletchley Park's Lost Heroes*, and working on major projects including *Doctor Who*, *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. An exhibition of Brett's art is scheduled for 4-15 November at the Atkins Building in Hinckley, Leicestershire – visit atkinsbuilding.co.uk/events for more information, and bit.ly/jones_art_show to visit the exhibition's JustGiving page.

Our thoughts are with Brett's family and friends at this sad time.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Not my cup of tea



Permission to say something controversial? And you have to believe me, I'm not doing this to be a contrarian and to start a fight. I used to do that on the radio years ago. I remember once saying on air we should close all libraries and turn them into Blockbusters as films were better than books. 'Turn them into Blockbusters' – that shows how long ago we are talking about. I had 52 complaints (none upheld!)

While that style of very light shock jockery was designed to get people going, what I am about to tell you is my true belief and I have never said it out loud. I'm a little nervous, but here we go. I AM NOT KEEN ON THE DESIGN OF THE ORIGINAL ZX SPECTRUM 48K.

Phew. It's out. I love bits of it. The rainbow logo is great and… and… OK, I like one bit of it. And I'm not knocking it as a machine. There's a reason it sold so many – the games are just so much fun. I still go back and dig out some of those games and love watching YouTubers play them. Everything inside the case is an absolute joy and something we should all cherish.

It's the small, frisbee-style build and the rubber keys that put me off. I think perhaps as a child learning BASIC I was scared by each key seemingly having 27 different uses. And compared to my Dragon and Beeb, the whole thing felt like a toy to me.

I always preferred the design of the +2. I only found out a year or so ago they weren't even built by Sinclair but instead manufactured by Amstrad. That was a shock but thinking about it makes sense. It looks similar to the old CPC 464. To my bigoted and closed mind, the +2 looks like a PC – a Proper Computer. Actual keys, a little bit of girth to it. Oh, and have you pressed the buttons on the cassette deck recently? As Alan Partridge might say – "nice action". It's wonderfully satisfying. Tough for me to say I like something by Lord Alan Sugar though. Oh God, I hope they invite me on the *Celebrity Apprentice*. If he spoke to me like he talks to those contestants he'd get what for.

Perhaps part of it comes from jealousy? Of course, I didn't have one and a friend of mine did. I was bullied at school for having a Dragon, including an absolutely terrible maths lesson where the two kids in front of me DESTROYED me because Dragon had been sold to a Spanish company. I went home and cried. Kids, right? Did younger me build up a prejudice as a child?

I'm not suggesting therapy will solve the issue, although as a practising counsellor I will work with any presenting problems. But we all hold prejudices, both positive and negative, that we often don't recognise or are surprised when others have contrary views. I genuinely hope I haven't offended anyone (look at me mum, I'm maturing!). Perhaps you could have a little look in your hearts and see if there are any dark opinions hiding in there. *

> "To my bigoted and closed mind, the +2 looks like a PC – a Proper Computer"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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GameSpew

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PCGamesN

"a *Game of the Year Contender*"
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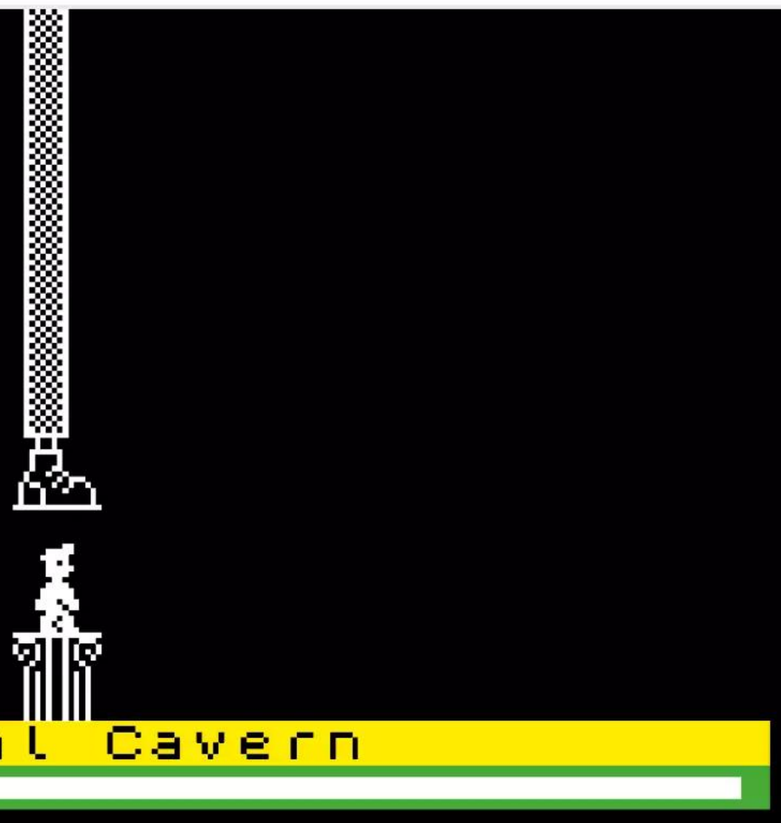
Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.



Back to the Eighties

Artificial Intelligence scares me. I've written about it before in this column, but that was when we were seeing the first flickers of what it can do.

Recently, I was listening to some new music by one of my favourite artists, Steven Wilson… except these songs had nothing to do with him: they were entirely created by AI. An artificial recreation of his voice on music made entirely by software. There was no uncanny valley effect; they were scarily accurate.

What scares me most is that I enjoyed a lot of these songs as much as I did his most recent album. I am SO conflicted by that. I understand all of the arguments against AI, but I think it's too late. It's out there. There's no putting it back in the box. We need to adapt or get left behind.

One of the arguments against AI taking over is that we'd all prefer art that's created by humans; reflections of a human soul, an insight into the human condition. But… these Steven Wilson songs are the first time I've really been faced with AI art that's almost indistinguishable from something a human – one whose work I'm familiar with – would create. People say we can tell when something hasn't been made by a person, but given the utter lack of empathy displayed by many on the internet, I'm not sure that's true.

> "We're going to see a whole new generation of Matthew Smiths whose imaginations aren't limited by their ability (or inability) to code in BASIC"

It's going to change the world beyond all recognition. I read an article the other day in which games industry artists were fearing for the future of their jobs. It's already happening that games companies are finding ways to utilise AI to make games production cheaper, quicker, and easier.

But… I'm trying to remain optimistic and not let this – as somebody who writes scripts for a living – get me down.

What I hope, what I think, is actually going to happen is a return to the Eighties. I believe this is going to re-democratise games development. We will see a resurgence of the bedroom coder boom, except it'll be the bedroom games prompt inputter. It'll make AAA games development accessible to everyone. Yes, indie games are bigger now than they've been in decades, but even then you still need a team, and certain skills.

We're going to see a whole new generation of Matthew Smiths whose imaginations aren't limited by their ability (or inability) to code in BASIC. Of course, it'll mean the internet will be flooded with games, but I'm hopeful the cream will rise to the top. It was exactly this way back in the Eighties. Creating games was relatively simple back then, which is why for every *Elite* or *The Lords Of Midnight* you got 500 games like *SQIJ*.

It'll be like that again, but these games will be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in terms of scope and scale with anything released by a major company.

What this means for the games industry isn't good, of course. It's a bleak situation in terms of jobs, as it is for the animation industry, for much of Hollywood, and for screenwriters like me. I mean, why should those who've not taken the time to learn a trade, or skills, be rewarded? Maybe it'll devalue games and other art too much. But… mark my words, that's where we're headed. *

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

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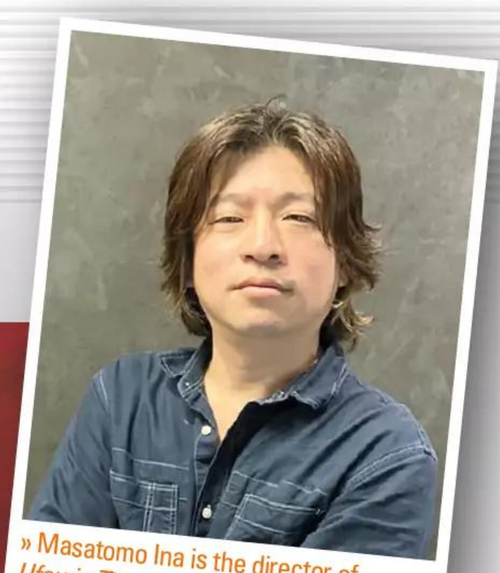
» Head of Sunsoft, Yuichi Ochi is promising to bring back Sunsoft games in a big way.



» Masatomo Ina is the director of *Ufouria The Saga 2*

» [Switch] All three games on *Retro Game Selection* will feature authentic-looking CRT filters.

Sunsoft

Yuichi Ochi on the return of Ufouria and more Sunsoft IP

> "Sunsoft has a long history of making games, from the Famicom era to now"
> **MASATOMO INA**

The Japanese developer Sunsoft is back in a big way thanks to *Ufouria The Saga 2* and its new *Retro Game Selection*. Sunsoft's head Yuichi Ochi, *Ufouria The Saga 2* director Masatomo Ina and *Retro Game Selection*'s director Shoki Harada tell us what to expect.

Why has Sunsoft embraced classic games again?

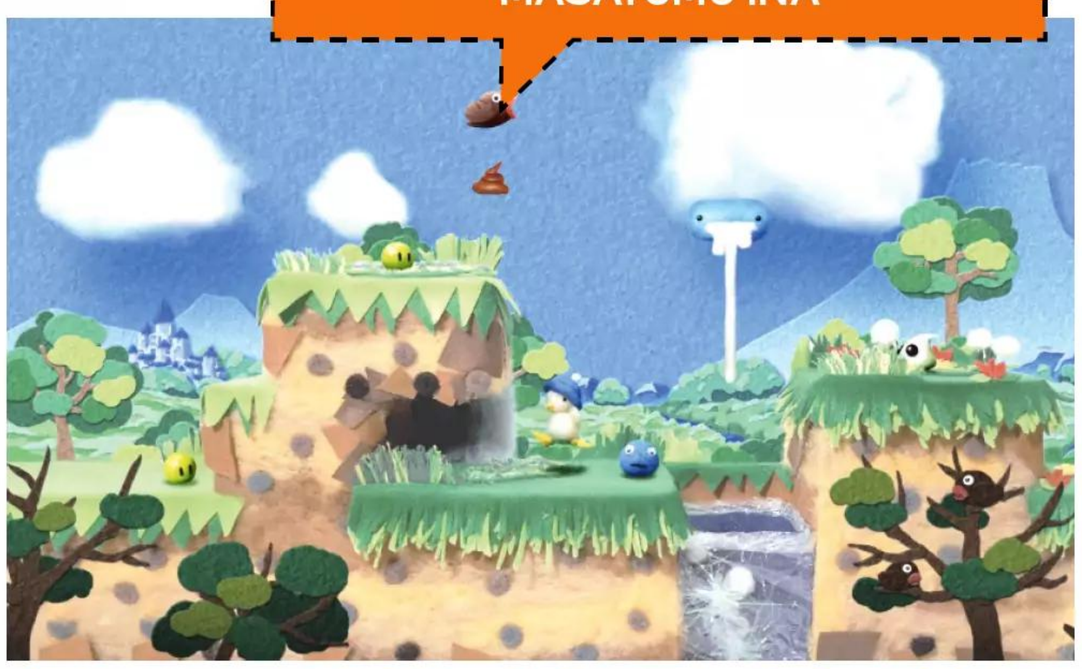
Yuichi Ochi: The answer is simple. It's what the game users would like to see from Sunsoft. Speaking from a business perspective, no one can rewind time, so the fact we have such classic titles is an advantage. There was never an option for me to not make the most of this.

Why partner with Red Art Games for these releases?

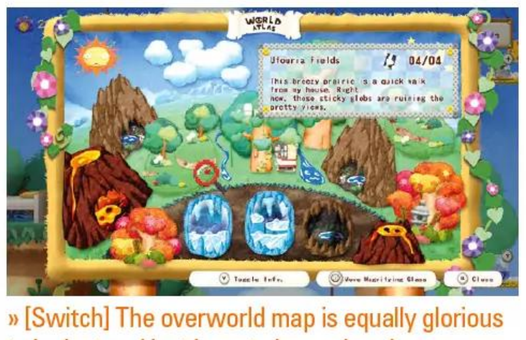
Yuichi Ochi: I met Red Art Games in 2022. I had heard of them from another Western company, and when we met, I felt their passion for Sunsoft and for retro games. There were other candidates to partner with for *Ufouria: The Saga 2* and *Retro Game Selection*, but Red Art Games' skills matched what we needed, and above all else I felt their passion.

Why has a *Ufouria* sequel taken so long?

Yuichi Ochi: *Ufouria: The Saga*, or *Hebereke*, is an interesting IP. Six titles have been released in the past under its name, but each is of a different genre. In that sense, it's true there have been several games in the franchise, but no sequel to the first game. Sunsoft has a history of not making sequels, and most of our other titles don't have sequels either. With that said, in this 21st century, under a new structure, I felt we should create this game as a sequel. So what I mean is that the gap in time was born as a result of these things.



» Here's an early concept built using felt. The style has been expertly transferred over to the final game.



» [Switch] The overworld map is equally glorious to look at and just begs to be explored.

» [Switch] Make sure you bring a jacket, this level from *Ufouria The Saga 2* looks cold.

» [Switch] *53 Stations Of The Tokaido* features on *Retro Game Selection*.

1UP x2
TO GO 7600 3ri
x0 x0 x1 x0
FIREWORK THROWER KANTARO's
53 Stations of the Tokaido
Action
Release on 3/07/1986
Your fiancée Momoko is waiting for you in Edo. Begin your journey across the 53 stations of the Tokaido to reach her... But wait ! Gozaemon, a rival merchant, asked his goons to stop you and steal your firework crafting techniques. Use your blasting weapon to make your way to your date !
PLAY (ENGLISH)
GALLERY
Change version
Confirm
Back

» [Switch] The presentation for *Retro Game Selection* looks great.

How will *Ufouria The Saga 2* expand on the original game?

Masatomo Ina: Our concept was 'delivering lots of love and energy to you', referring to the endearing and lovingly designed *Ufouria* world of the original game, and all the memorable *Ufouria* fun we had playing it. Our biggest goal in this project was to take this love and energy and fun and evolve it into a modern game.

While respecting the charm of the original's pixel art, we wanted to express the characters' cuteness and appeal at 120%. We ended up going with this feltwork and iron beads design not for rich visuals or trends, but because the soft handmade look of it naturally matched the concept.

By actually creating much of the models with felt by hand, and turning that into the concept art for the game, I think we were able to deliver the love and energy of the world of *Ufouria* to everyone from adults with memories playing the original, and to kids playing for the first time.

» Shoki Harada hopes gamers will enjoy the incoming *Retro Game Selection*.

How has the creation of games changed since releasing the original *Ufouria*?

Masatomo Ina: Sunsoft has a long history of making games, from the Famicom era to now. During this time, game creation has changed tremendously, and I think it's mostly just how you'd imagine. However, I think one thing that hasn't changed through all these years is how game creators take pride in their work, and have fun and enjoy creating their games.

How did you choose the games for *Retro Game Selection*?

Shoki Harada: We had already decided to do a collection of Famicom titles, as it was the first bundle of ported games since our "Sunsoft is back!" declaration, and they were our first games. From there, we selected the games from a wide variety of perspectives. They include, how often they had been ported, whether or not they had sequels, whether the users were interested, and whether the game contents would still hold up now. In the end, we ended up going with these three titles, and for all of them, the visual design was handled by artist/mangaka Moriken Sensei. But actually, this is completely by coincidence.

What quality-of-life features will be included?

Shoki Harada: We implemented a save feature, and a feature that lets you rewind by a few seconds. They're features often seen in recent retro game ports, but the rewind feature complements the high difficulty of *Tokaido Gojosan-tsugi* and *Wings Of Madoola* for which they are known for, and the save function goes well with *Ripple Island* which is an adventure game.

How does it feel bringing these games to the West for the first time?

Yuichi Ochi: Sometimes we ask on X (Twitter) in English, "Which of our retro games do you want to see more of?" and the titles in this collection had a lot of requests. Some not so much, but there were still voices asking for it. In the entertainment business, as well as in games, the most important thing is to meet the expectations of the users. I'm very happy we were able to take a step in that direction. ✱

» [Switch] We're loving *Ufouria The Saga 2*'s art-style. It looks lovely and reminds us of *LittleBigPlanet*.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

» [Wii] Nick still hasn't played *No More Heroes*, despite accidentally buying the game twice. [That tracks – Ed]

FEBRUARY 2008 – When all your heroes are gone, your nights bring unpleasant dreams and a car crash seems like paradise to you, maybe it's time to hit The Club? That's how Nick Thorpe is choosing to interpret this old release schedule

NEWS FEBRUARY 2008

On 17 February, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia. Though Serbia refused to recognise the declaration as legal, the UN General Assembly referred the case to the International Court Of Justice, which advised in 2010 that the declaration did not violate international law. Kosovo still does not have a seat at the UN and is only recognised by 104 countries, with the most notable European holdout being Spain.

Nine-year-old Shannon Matthews was reported missing in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, on 19 February. She was recovered safely on 14 March. However, police discovered that her kidnapping had been arranged by Shannon's mother Karen and Michael Donovan, uncle to Karen's boyfriend, with the goal of using the publicity to make money. Donovan was convicted of abduction and false imprisonment and Karen Matthews of child neglect and perverting the course of justice, both receiving eight-year prison sentences.

Fidel Castro officially stepped down as the President of Cuba due to ill health on 24 February. The controversial leader first came to power as prime minister in 1959 following the Cuban Revolution.

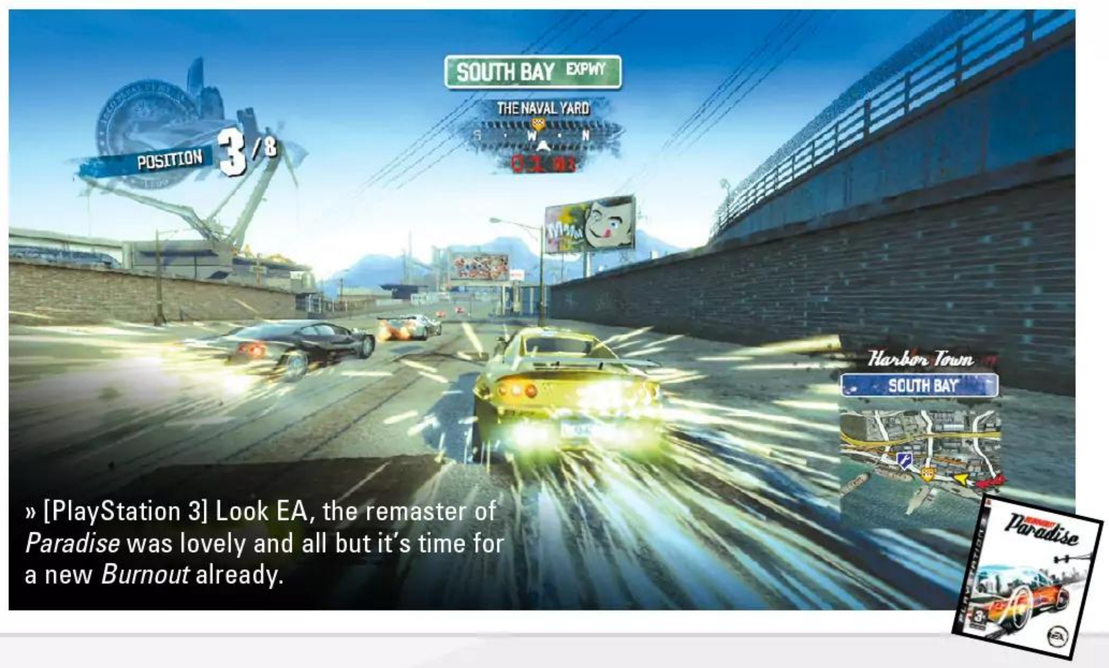
THE LATEST NEWS FROM FEBRUARY 2008

Criterion unleashed *Burnout Paradise* on the HD consoles this month, and *Official Xbox 360 Magazine* felt that taking the aggressive automobile action from standard circuits to the open world "has managed to refresh the franchise without completely changing its heart", giving it 8/10. Though it felt that the core gameplay remained compelling, *games™* gave the game 7/10, bemoaning the lack of fast travel and the ease with which you could miss turnings and get lost, as well as the removal of features from past games such as Aftertouch and Signature Takedowns. *Edge*, giving the game 9/10, presciently declared "it might be the last *Burnout* you ever need". Other scores included 5/5 from *360*, 9/10 from *X360* and 74% from *Play*.

Those preferring to vent their aggression via bullets instead of bumpers could try *The Club* instead. *X360* felt that Bizarre Creations' score attack third-person shooter "takes repetitive action, places it in a context, lays down some ground rules and creates something utterly compelling", and gave it 8/10. *Official PlayStation Magazine* warned, "Play it for depth and you'll come away feeling cheated," giving it 7/10. *Edge* also gave it 7/10, and *360* awarded it 3/5.

If you were looking for downloadable delights, the primary Xbox 360 offering of the month was *Sensible World Of Soccer*. *OXM* felt that the conversion of the beloved Amiga classic was "almost the perfect embodiment of what Xbox Live Arcade is supposed to represent", and gave it 9/10, with *X360* awarding it the full 10/10. On PS3, *Play* felt that *Riff: Everyday Shooter* "succeeds in coalescing shoot-'em-ups with rhythm action", and gave it 86%. *OPM*'s 7/10 review judged it to be "a bit stingy with its range of floaty melodies", while *games™* gave a 9/10 review that was "vague, and deliberately so" because "giving detailed examples would be to undermine Mak's intentions".

The most exciting platform exclusive of the month was



» [PlayStation 3] Look EA, the remaster of *Paradise* was lovely and all but it's time for a new *Burnout* already.

Grasshopper Manufacture's *No More Heroes*. *Edge* loved the combat, opining that "what initially appears to be a limited system reveals such variation beneath the surface that it can be mastered to a degree that once-unbeatable enemies won't be able to touch you", and further declared it "by far one of the best looking and most distinctive Wii games to date". That earned it 9/10, and *nRevolution* gave it 9.0/10, praising its "quirks and humour", but damning the technical aspects as "rough as recycled bog roll".

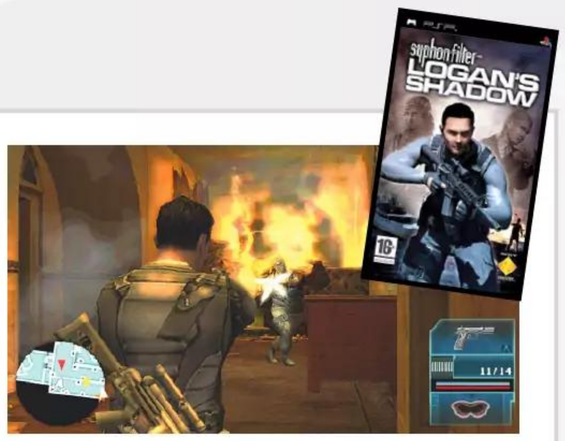
Also on the Wii this month, *NiGHTS: Journey Of Dreams* marked a rare return to the Saturn back catalogue for Sega. In an 8.0/10 review, *nRevolution* praised the sequel's level design as "generally excellent" and the boss battles as "unique and wonderfully inventive". By contrast *games™* felt that "terrible, badly designed filler" like the "agonisingly linear platform levels" dragged down the experience, giving it 6/10. *Edge* gave it the same score, while *Official Nintendo Magazine* gave it 79%, additionally citing "niggling control issues" as a fault.

Over on the PC, *Universe At War: Earth Assault* from Petroglyph Studios sought to succeed the real-time strategy lineage of Westwood Studios. PC Gamer felt the game to be "at once *thoroughly* enjoyable and at the same time, well, a bit old hat", and that it "does try to furnish us with some entertaining constructs" but had "preposterously unattractive environments". That was good for a score of 78%. *Edge* only offered it 6/10, criticising its "relatively crude visuals and a lacklustre single-player campaign", but feeling that it "excels" in multiplayer and offered "a genuinely entertaining skirmish game for those who still hanker for the base-building battles of old".

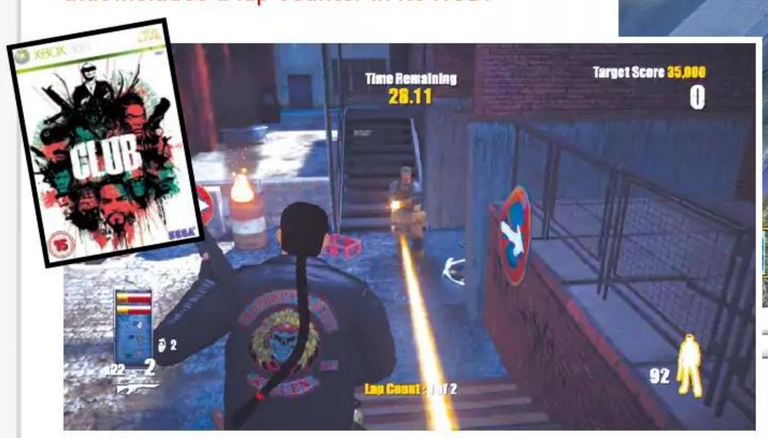
Portable game of the month was PSP stealth sequel *Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow*. *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* gave it 9/10, noting that, "Every single death is as loud and ugly as possible," and that it was "all the more fun for such gratuitousness". *Edge* felt that the game's visuals provided "yet another example of the PSP's power", but criticised the controls, saying that it was "hard to escape the feeling that it should all be played with a DualShock", and that the game was "unavoidably tied to the problems associated with action games of this type on PSP", settling on a score of 6/10.

Join us again next month, when we'll have a highly anticipated hack-and-slash sequel to discuss. ✱

» [Wii] Fun fact: **Retro Gamer**'s *NiGHTS* cover actually used artwork from *Journey Of Dreams*, not the original.



» [PSP] It seems a tad unfair to criticise *Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow* over a hardware design issue.



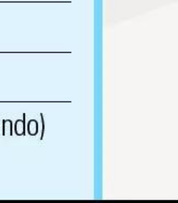
» [Xbox 360] Rare is the third-person shooter that includes a lap counter in its HUD.

» [PC] *Universe At War: Earth Assault* wasn't pretty, but it could still deliver a good time.

CHARTS

FEBRUARY 2008

PLAYSTATION 3



1 – **Assassin's Creed** (Ubisoft)
2 – **Need For Speed ProStreet** (EA)
3 – **Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare** (Activision)
4 – **Kane & Lynch: Dead Men** (Eidos)
5 – **FIFA 08** (EA)

WII

1 – **Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games** (Sega)
2 – **Mario Party 8** (Nintendo)
3 – **Super Mario Galaxy** (Nintendo)
4 – **Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree** (Nintendo)
5 – **Rayman Raving Rabbids 2** (Ubisoft)

DS

1 – **Dr Kawashima's Brain Training** (Nintendo)
2 – **More Brain Training From Dr Kawashima** (Nintendo)
3 – **Cooking Mama** (Square Enix)
4 – **Sight Training** (Nintendo)
5 – **New Super Mario Bros** (Nintendo)

MUSIC

1 – **Mercy** (Duffy)
2 – **Rockstar** (Nickelback)
3 – **Now You're Gone** (Basshunter)
4 – **Sun Goes Down** (David Jordan)
5 – **Chasing Pavements** (Adele)

THIS MONTH IN...

Official Xbox 360 Magazine

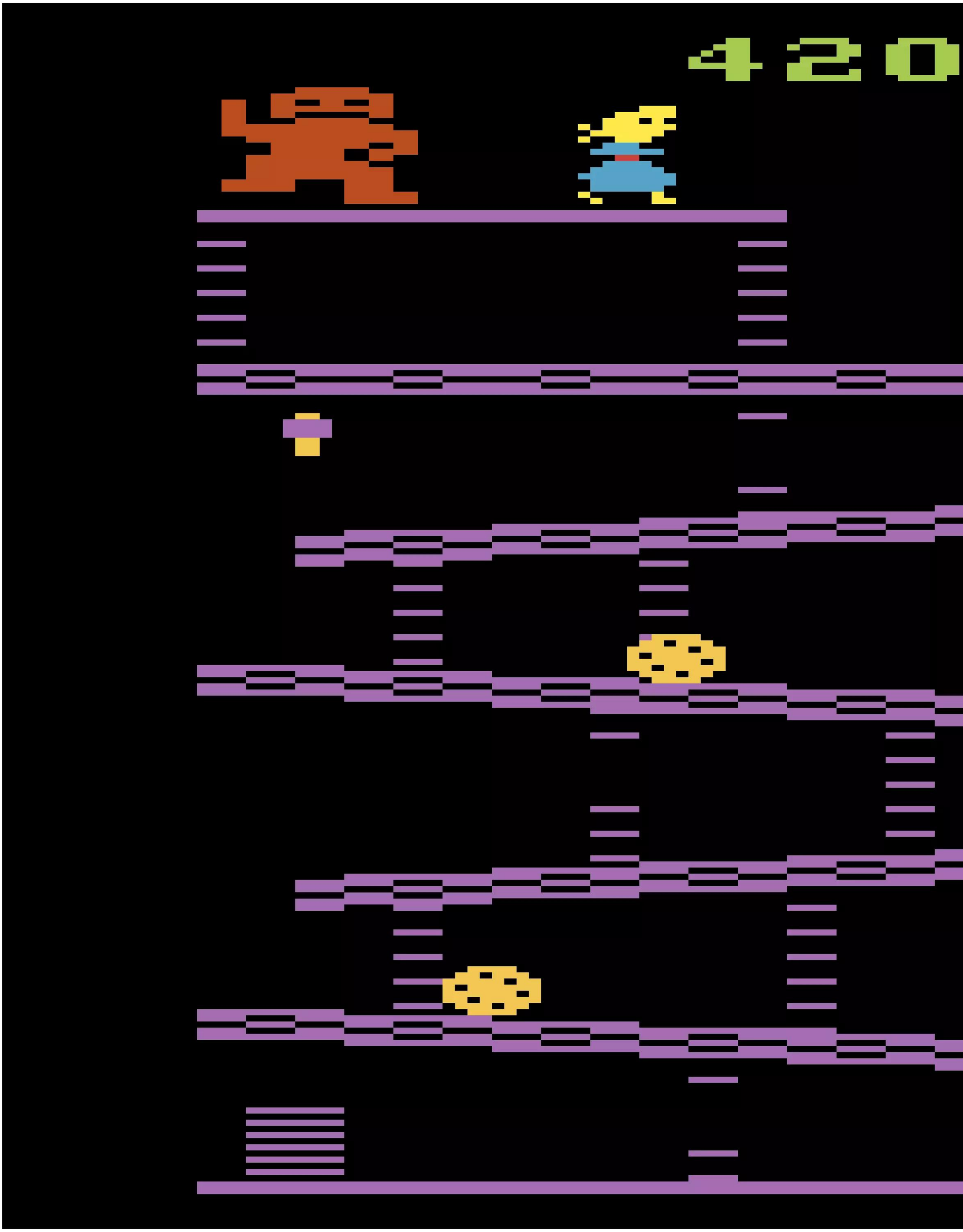
Should Xbox Live be ad-funded and free? Online editor – and our former editor in chief – Ryan King thinks not, asking. "Aren't we bombarded with enough marketing BS already?" Time has vindicated him, as all platforms now charge for online play.

games™

"Konami's *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* for Famicom, for the love of God," laments columnist Tim Rogers, browsing Japan's Virtual Console. "Seriously, anyone who likes that game is just pretending. They should pay me ¥500 to download it."

Official PlayStation Magazine

Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles didn't impress *OPM*. The magazine slated it as being "just a bit *too* unforgiving" in a 4/10 review, stating, "This might have seemed enjoyable 14 years ago, but then so did MC Hammer."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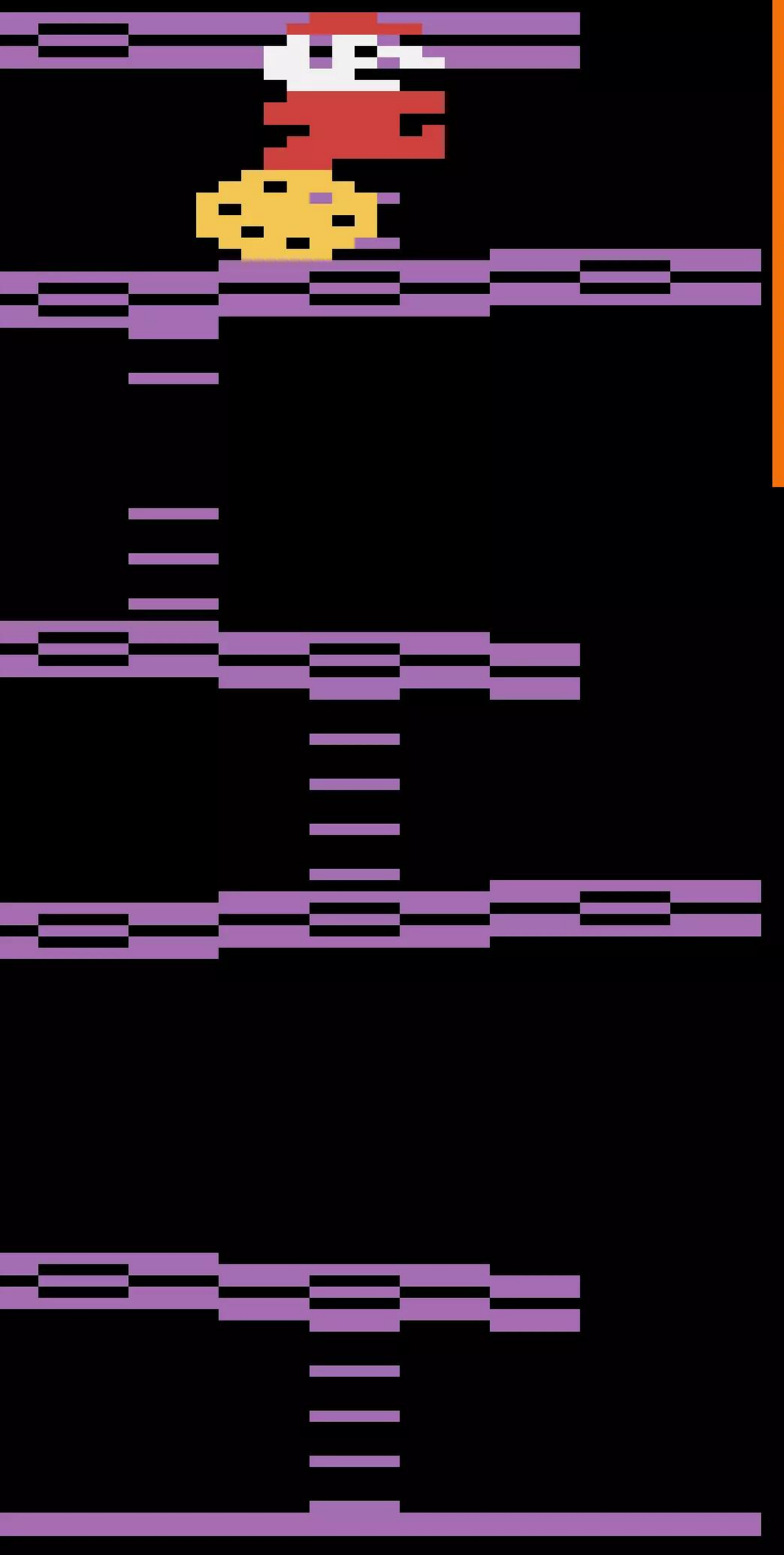


Donkey Kong

ABRIDGED TOO FAR?

RETROREVIVAL

» ATARI 2600 » 1982 » COLECO

This may be hard to believe given the way I make my living, but although I know that I own the first videogame I ever played, I can't actually remember which one it was. I know for sure that I played it in my family home on what was then my dad's Atari 2600 and I'm certain it was either *Donkey Kong* or *Centipede*. This all happened so long ago that the Soviet Union still existed though, so neither my dad nor I can say for sure. I was yet to start nursery school at the time, so at least I don't have to worry that my memory is failing. Better yet, I don't have to worry that my memory is failing. [Erm… – Ed]

Of the two candidates, I find myself drawn to *Donkey Kong* more. *Centipede* is a fantastic game converted well, but *Donkey Kong* really represents the journey I've come on when it comes to understanding videogames. At first, it was just a game I really liked. In the mid-Nineties, *Donkey Kong*'s resurgence on the SNES and Game Boy clued me in to the fact that it was a Nintendo series, and Mario's point of origin no less. As a teenager venturing online, I learned about how the game I loved was cut back from its arcade incarnation, and derided in some circles.

My appreciation for the Atari 2600 version of *Donkey Kong* is greater than ever as an adult. Learning how the Atari 2600 functions, and how it was not at all designed to draw asymmetrical playfields, has completely recontextualised the sight of this stage for me. Even though the angry ape might look like a crude rendition of Bungle from *Rainbow* and I've certainly played more faithful home versions, it remains a fun approximation of a classic that I like to occasionally revisit – and one that reminds me that there's always something new to learn. ✱

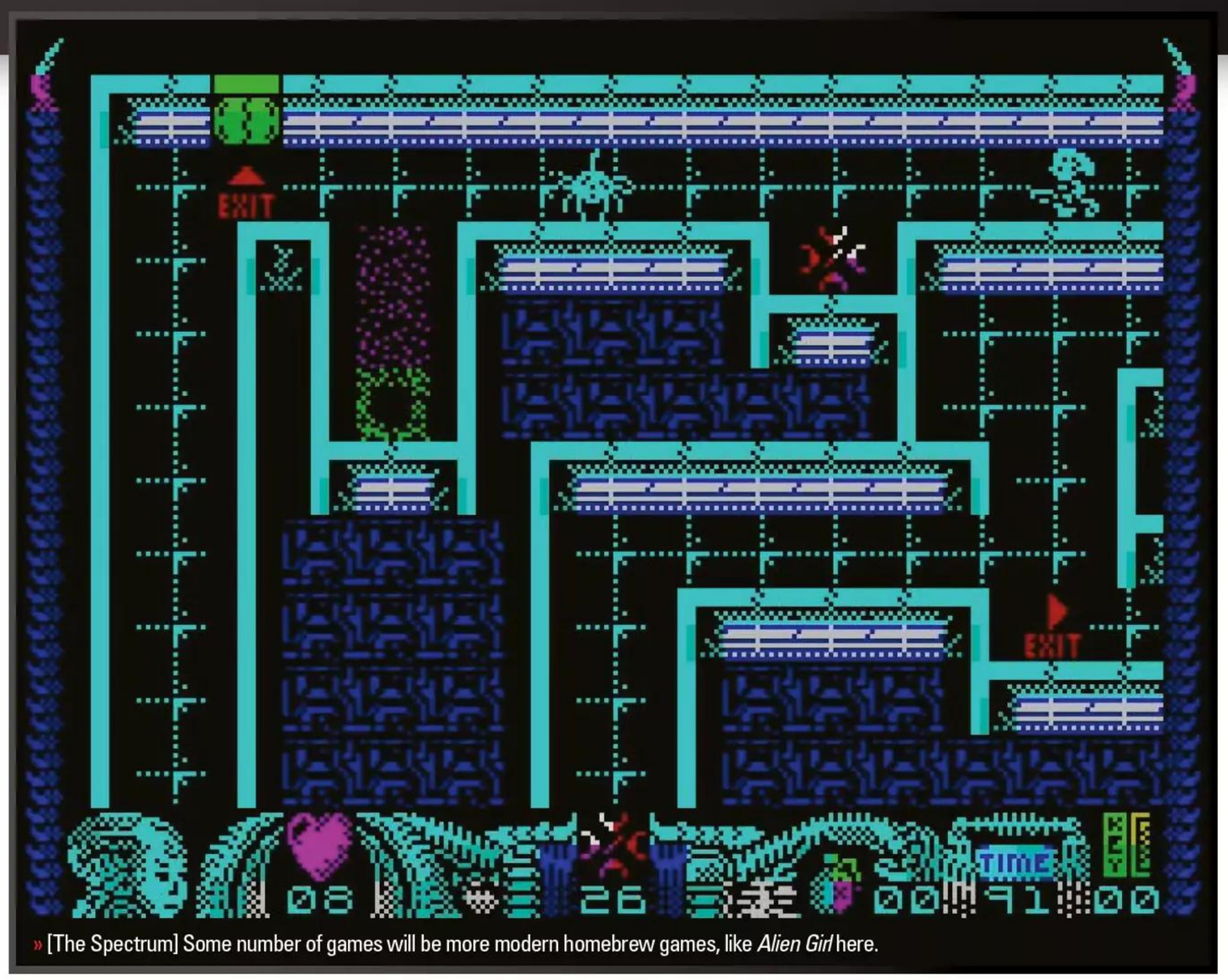
inside

THE SPECTRUM

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC HOME COMPUTERS EVER MADE, AND IT'S BACK IN PLUG-AND-PLAY FORM. WE SPEAK TO THE PEOPLE BEHIND IT TO FIND OUT WHY IT'S TAKEN SO LONG, AND GET A CHANCE TO GIVE OUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS AHEAD OF LAUNCH

words by nick thorpe

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE SPECTRUM YOU CAN VISIT THE RETRO GAMES LIMITED WEBSITE USING THIS QR CODE



» [The Spectrum] Some number of games will be more modern homebrew games, like *Alien Girl* here.

» [The Spectrum] A two-player beat-'em-up is something every plug-and-play machine needs, we think.

» [The Spectrum] So far there's a good variety of games to be had, but we don't know the full 48 just yet.

» Chris Smith, chief technology officer at Retro Games Ltd.

» Darren Melbourne, licensing director at Retro Games Ltd.

Of all the things the Retro Gamer team could be surprised by, you wouldn't think the device you're seeing on these pages should rank very highly on the list. We didn't think so either, but the more we thought about The Spectrum, the more it has surprised us. What initially seemed like something simple and obvious has given rise to a whole load of questions, which ultimately left us dumbfounded as to how the machine could even exist.

What is The Spectrum? It's a full-sized recreation of the classic Sinclair computer in its original form, complete with working rubber keys. It comes with 48 built-in games ranging from Eighties icons to modern homebrew hits, and the ability to load your own games via USB memory stick. If you want to forego the slick menu and jump straight into a familiar grey prompt screen, that's possible too. Naturally, it also has USB controller support and outputs video via HDMI at 720p. It's going to be out on 22 November 2024 for £89.99, but we've already had our hands on a prototype version of the machine.

So, let's take the surprises one by one. First of all, the timing – The Spectrum comes hot on the heels of The 400 Mini, which released on 28 March 2024, and we simply weren't expecting a new machine so fast. As Chris Smith tells us, much of it comes down to the experience and growth within the company, which has previously created The C64 Mini and its full-size counterpart, The A500 Mini and The 400 Mini. "When we did The C64 Mini, we didn't know what we were going to be doing next – the full-size 64, yes, but we didn't know what we'd be doing past that. When we built the Atari, we knew what we were going to be doing next," he explains. "We've got more staff, and the people we do have really understand the Spectrum. We set ourselves some goals around this to see how fast – not so much how *fast* – it's more how efficiently can we do this?"

According to Darren Melbourne, a large driving force was simply proving that it could be done. "We had our company off-site at the beginning of January this year. We all sat in a room and we were with Stuart [Chiplin] at Plaion, and we said if we really pulled all the stops out, we could get a Spectrum released for Christmas. And he said, 'There's no way you can do that,'" he recalls. "I think quite a lot of it came down to proving Stuart wrong, so we literally pulled all the stops out to ensure that we could get it done for Christmas." Chris admits, "It probably was a little bit too fast. It was ambitious, yes, but we've done it," before elaborating on his sentimental reasons for the timing. "I was really, really motivated to get this done in this time frame. I remember Christmas 1983, it was a big time for the Spectrum. It just felt appropriate – for me, the Spectrum had to be out for Christmas, you know?"

> "IT PROBABLY WAS A LITTLE BIT TOO FAST. IT WAS AMBITIOUS, YES, BUT WE'VE DONE IT"
> — CHRIS SMITH

The second surprise, that Retro Games Ltd has chosen to skip the step of making a mini version, makes sense when explained. "The one thing that was evident about doing the Spectrum was it's almost a mini anyway, in terms of its form factor," says Chris. But it's the third surprise that really baffles us, and

» Here's the box you'll see on store shelves – or more likely, via parcel delivery.

» [The Spectrum] Securing *Manic Miner* involved, "Indian meals and lots of Guinness," says Darren.

» [The Spectrum] Doing *The Great Escape* certainly made a change from watching it every Christmas.

» [The Spectrum] *Game Over II* was probably renamed such because everyone remembers the cover art for the original, right?

» There's little to distinguish the machine from a regular 48K Spectrum at first glance.

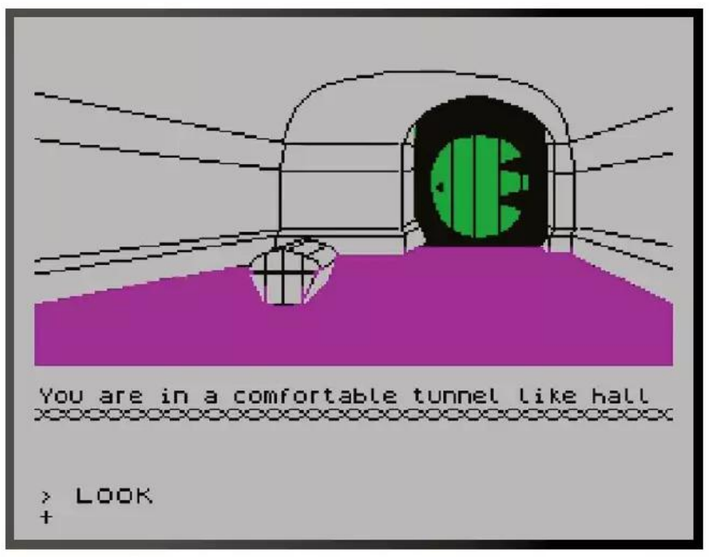
▶ that's our surprise over the fact that a product like The Spectrum doesn't already exist. There have been plenty of Spectrum-related hardware products over the last decade or so, and while it's fair to say they're not all necessarily targeting the same market as The Spectrum, the interest in the machine is clearly there. With that in mind, we're perplexed as to why so many companies haven't taken what seems like such an obvious path, in creating a plug-and-play machine that looks and feels like the original.

"Why has nobody done the simple approach? It's actually not that simple. You're recreating something that was originally created 40 years ago, which having now done quite a few of these, on the face of it, is really easy, straightforward and simple. When you get into it, it's really difficult, really laborious and really hard," says Darren. "Anyone who's looked at doing this product like this would have struggled with the manufacturing," Chris adds, before relating the difficulties that have been had in getting the distinctive rubber keys right.

> "WHY HAS NOBODY DONE THE SIMPLE APPROACH? IT'S ACTUALLY NOT THAT SIMPLE"
> — DARREN MELBOURNE

"We thought it'd be easy, because Rick Dickinson designed this to be simple to manufacture. It was all about everything being a good cost choice – it had to be, that was their USP," Chris says, not too long after a phone call with the manufacturers in China. "They use rubber anyway, for stuff inside our game controls. Tolerances can vary on it, and it's fine because you don't see it. But when you've got the keyboards, and you've got the rubber that's sticking up through a metal plate and the rubber is shrinking, or it's not coming out of the mould in the right shape, you're going to get keys sticking – pressing one might be really soft and pressing zero might be really hard, and all that kind of stuff. And I was like, why is this a problem? 40 years ago, they got consistency every single time, surely we can do better?

"The problem came down to, yes, this was something they did 40 years ago, but they don't do it this way now. The techniques and things which made it easy for Sinclair to do, they haven't got those now. It wasn't that they didn't care, they just didn't know how to do it. You know, nobody makes rubber keyboards



» [The Spectrum] Text-based games have been an awkward fit for previous Spectrum hardware projects.

like that. Or so we thought. But then we found somebody that makes keyboards for iPads that are rubber. Those keyboards they've now done for us are brilliant. It's perfect. It's uniformity in key pressure. There's no drift, they've got a special machine to make these things, and that was the difference."

Another hurdle for anyone attempting a machine like this comes in the form of a multi-billion dollar corporation. "The Spectrum ROMs are owned by Comcast, and they're not going to even answer your email unless there's, you know, £10,000 in it for them," Chris explains, before Darren advises him that he may wish to add an extra zero to the end of that figure. So there's another surprise when we don't see Comcast anywhere in the system's credits list, and it turns out that The Spectrum features a new ROM built upon open source work. "Given that I'm a Spectrum games programmer from back in the day and have continued to write software for the Spectrum, my understanding plus the people we work with, of how games do what they do and what they actually need in ROM and what they don't need, allowed us to come up with a ROM that is a derivative of those things that came before it, but has a very particular requirement set, which is for game execution compatibility," Chris tells us. "It took a long time, took a lot of testing, but because this is all based on other open source stuff it's something we'll be open sourcing as well, which will benefit future projects."

In fact, Chris tells us, "We've been able to do this product in less time than we would have necessarily done products in mainly because

road to rubber

OTHER COMPANIES' ATTEMPTS AT HONOURING THE ZX SPECTRUM'S HARDWARE LEGACY

ZX SPECTRUM VEGA

2015

You couldn't accuse the old Vega of being short on games, with 1,000 packed in and the option to add more via Micro SD card. The joypad body didn't mesh well with the many text adventures included, and these days the composite video output feels even more dated than in 2015.

THE RECREATED SINCLAIR ZX SPECTRUM

2015

Elite's approach was certainly an interesting one, if maybe a bit too fiddly for our liking. Rather than releasing a stand-alone gaming device, it recreated the venerable Speccy in full-size form as a Bluetooth keyboard. This could then be used with dedicated apps on iPad, PC and other devices.

ZX SPECTRUM NEXT

2017

The Next is aimed at the hardcore Spectrum enthusiast. The computer sports both an updated case style and an expanded set of capabilities compared to original machines, and doesn't feature built-in games. Board-only machines arrived in 2017, but finished models didn't ship until 2020.

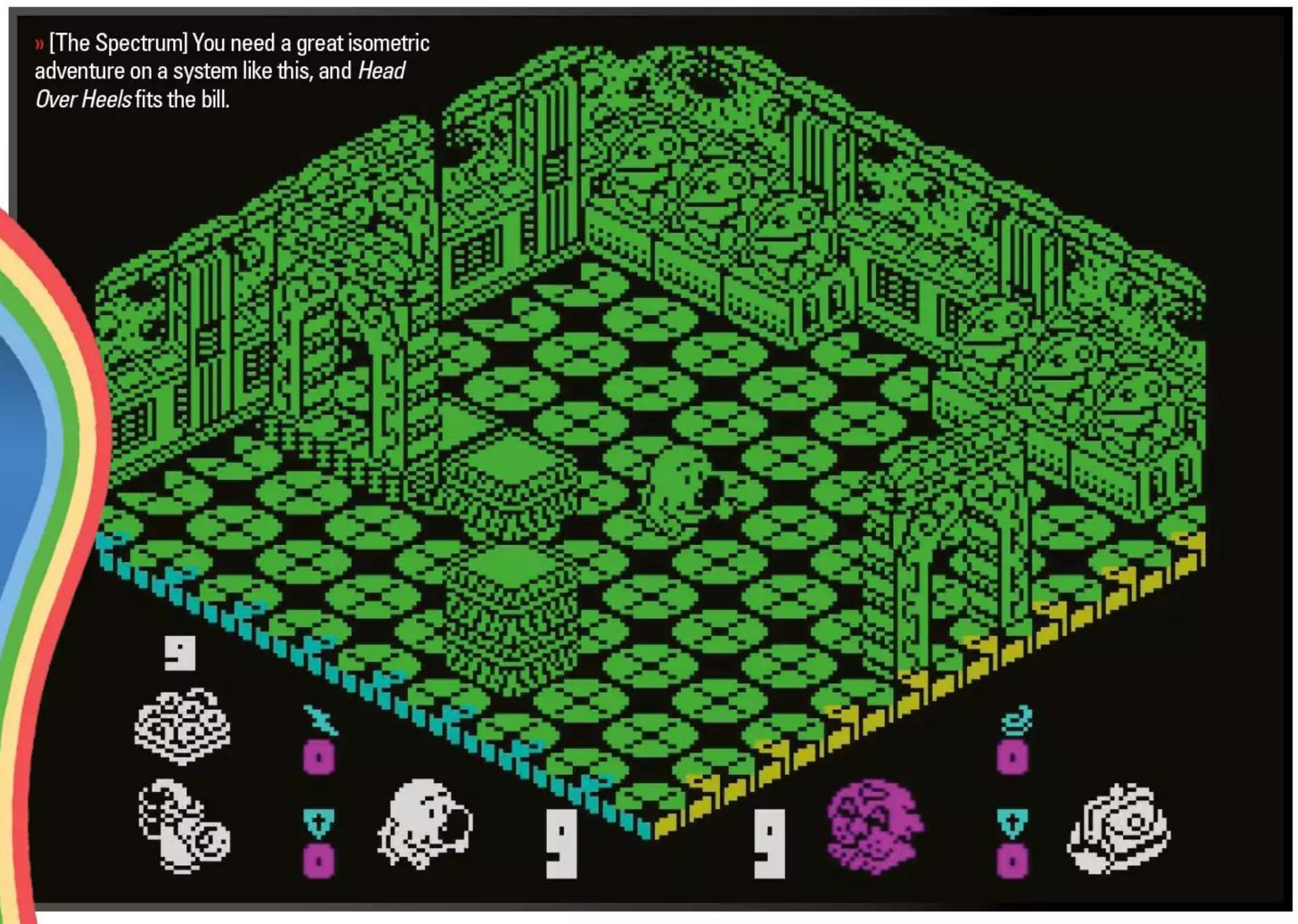
ZX TOUCH

2023

This machine is currently available, and seeks to bring the ZX Spectrum experience into the handheld console realm. It ships with a number of homebrew games included, but if you want anything more recognisable from the Eighties you'll have to supply the software yourself.

» [The Spectrum] *Saboteur* is a remastered version – could we see more such games in the final 48?

» [The Spectrum] Why aren't modern football pitches this shade of green? Answers on a postcard.



» [The Spectrum] You need a great isometric adventure on a system like this, and *Head Over Heels* fits the bill.

we understand the Spectrum architecture so well. Everything in this – bar Linux – is our own code." That extends to the emulator at the heart of the device. "It's the one that I used as the basis for the ZX Spectrum Vega, but it's been extended and expanded from that time," Chris says. "It's got much better tape handling. But it's one that I knew very well, and it was one that was already designed to be put into an embedded product, so it didn't have its own user interface and all that kind of stuff."

But what of the name, or the form factor of the hardware itself? "We were quite fortunate that there aren't any trademarks for The Spectrum itself – only, I believe, for ZX Spectrum. For The Spectrum, we didn't have any problems whatsoever," Darren tells us. "As you may or may not be aware, there is a time restriction on how long an actual shape or a form factor can be trademarked and copyrighted unless it's renewed, which obviously Rick Dickinson's incredible Spectrum had never been renewed, and it's not been in the marketplace, in any commercial, viable form for decades. So we had a pretty clear run-in really."

While clearing the rights for the design and name was a relatively straightforward task, the licensing of games proved trickier. "[For The 400 Mini], it took almost 14 months for us to track down where all the games resided and to get everything signed off," says Darren, contrasting it against The Spectrum. "We had under six months to locate all the games that we wanted and some of the lengths we had to go to to get these signed off will be one day

The games

TAKE A LOOK AT THE TEN GAMES REVEALED FOR THE SPECTRUM SO FAR

Alien Girl

Javier Fopiani's homebrew game sees you as a human-alien hybrid, roaming around top-down environments as you battle to assert your place as the one true queen. It's a nice-looking game and has some particularly cool AY music.

Army Moves

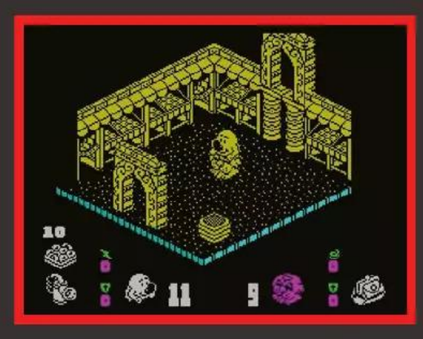
Tackling the enemy however you can is the name of the game in this horizontally scrolling shooter. You'll start off in a Jeep before taking to the air in a helicopter, and finally making your way into battle on foot.

Game Over II

Another game where you start off in a vehicle before heading out on foot, *Game Over II* starts you off in typical horizontally scrolling shooter fashion before transitioning into more of a platform game. It was also known as *Phantis*.

The Great Escape

This isometric adventure is the ultimate wartime prison break. Make sure you don't draw too much suspicion to yourself, while taking every opportunity to find one of the possible ways to escape the clutches of your captors.



Head Over Heels

Jon Ritman and Bernie Drummond delivered an isometric adventure for the ages, as you work to bring Head and Heels together and use their differing abilities to liberate enslaved planets. A brilliant inclusion, to be sure.

the subject of a book, I'm sure." By way of an example, he says, "Imagine *The Hobbit*, which was written by Beam Software, which was dissolved 37-38 years ago. ***The Hobbit*** licence, of course, resides in one place, the code licence resides somewhere else. Trying to tie all those moving pieces together in six months for just one title was not the easiest thing we've ever done." Having said all of that, he concedes, "I think the one thing that worked in our favour on this occasion, is that the majority of the people we're dealing with in this instance lived in either Spain or the UK."

So far, we can only name ten of the games coming to The Spectrum – *Army Moves, Game Over II, The Great Escape, Head Over Heels, The Hobbit, Manic Miner, Match Day II, Saboteur, Target: Renegade* and *Alien Girl*. "I think it's fair to say we're incredibly pleased with the final line-up that we've got," says Darren. "I mean, just the ones there, I think are some of the greatest games ever written on the platform." There are some undeniably great games there, though we expect that some of you won't be familiar with *Alien Girl*, a homebrew release from 2020. "I think it's fair to say that we decided that a percentage should be some of the newer titles, that showed off what can be done in the subsequent decades, when people really know the hardware. So there's a comfortable percentage of newer titles, but I would say still, the majority are classics that people know," Darren explains. The Spectrum is compatible with a range of controllers, including the one Retro Games Ltd introduced with The A500 Mini – it's this one you'll see on the system menus, when looking at game control schemes. One of the reasons that the game licensing had to be signed off so early is to allow time for the software team to create custom mappings for each game on these controllers, as while games like *Manic Miner* were simple, other games including *Head Over Heels* were more challenging to map. "We have a little document, it's a one-pager which gives like an Xbox, PlayStation kind of arrangement, and labels the buttons – these are primary actions, these are secondary actions, but then these are also secondary actions. So that's a help to whoever's doing the mapping," Chris explains.

Despite that fact, The Spectrum won't include a controller as standard. "It wasn't

» The party's in the back, with all-new USB and HDMI ports as well as the Home button.

» [The Spectrum] If you don't love the rubber key experience, USB keyboards work on The Spectrum.

"I THINK IT'S FAIR TO SAY WE'RE INCREDIBLY PLEASED WITH THE FINAL LINE-UP THAT WE'VE GOT"
DARREN MELBOURNE

THE HOBBIT

This is the classic adventure game, which means you'll definitely want to put down the controller. You know the score here – Thorin sings about gold, you get a bit frustrated with the parser, creative profanity ensues.

MANIC MINER

Matthew Smith's platform game had to be on here, didn't it? The single-screen stages are still immensely satisfying to tackle all these years later. If you want a challenge, be sure to keep the music on while playing.

MATCH DAY II

Another Jon Ritman creation, and one of the best sports games of its era. If it was raining outside or the kid who owned the football got called in for dinner, this would be the next best way to enjoy the beautiful game.

SABOTEUR

Or more accurately, *Saboteur Remastered* – a faster, optimised version of the classic action adventure game that boasts additional graphics and features. Guide your ninja to steal the enemy data, with a minimum of fuss.

TARGET: RENEGADE

Just to add a bit of variety, here's a beat-'em-up that has always been highly regarded on the Speccy. It's a sequel to the Technos arcade game *Renegade*, but was produced in the UK for the home-computer market.

RETRO GAMES REWIND

A LOOK BACK AT THE MACHINES RETRO GAMES LTD HAS PREVIOUSLY RELEASED

THE C64 MINI

■ 2018

Unsurprisingly, this debut effort had 64 built-in games including the likes of *Impossible Mission*, *California Games*, *Monty On The Run* and *Paradroid*. It was a good start, although the included joystick was a bit stiff and many people longed for a full-sized model.

THE C64

■ 2019

The successor to The C64 Mini had all of the size of the original machine, and a fully working keyboard to boot. It added VIC-20 support too, with some Jeff Minter classics from that computer joining the list of games. The joystick was reworked and improved as well.

THE A500 MINI

■ 2022

Another Commodore machine made sense, and this time it was back to the Minis. The A500 Mini also emulates the Amiga 1200, and introduced Retro Games Ltd's CD32-style The Gamepad. This is arguably the best of the bunch so far, for simplifying a system that can be tricky for newcomers.

THE 400 MINI

■ 2024

This versatile device emulates the Atari 8-bit range and the Atari 5200, and its 25 games are a mixture of memorable hits and technical showcases. It's a good system, albeit one that's arguably more fiddly than the others as it tries to modify a one-button joystick to modern needs.

▶ a decision that was taken lightly, and that has actually caused some complications, because we kept forgetting it didn't come with a joystick when we were trying to do the mapping and forgetting that the primary user interface is going to be the keyboard," Chris confesses. However, he felt that the decision was worth sticking with despite the trouble, largely for philosophical reasons. "You look at all of these games, having a joystick was secondary. I never had a joystick in all the years I had a Spectrum. I never bothered, I just played with the keyboard," says Chris. "If you ship a controller with it, people are going to use the controller, they might just go to that. If you don't have a controller with it, you're kind of inviting them to use the keyboard, which is the experience of the Spectrum. I personally feel we would be depriving the end user of an experience that they would unknowingly circumvent by plugging in a controller, so that's why it's being done that way."

One way in which the experience *will* differ from the Eighties is in the capabilities of the system. Though it is designed to resemble the original 48K model of the ZX Spectrum, The Spectrum includes support for 128K games and the AY audio chip found in 128K machines. It also includes optional support for ULAplus graphics, which offer a wider colour palette than the Spectrum standard.

As with previous Retro Games Ltd machines, The Spectrum will support loading of games via USB memory stick, and it will also support loading of system ROM files. "We don't supply the ROMs," Chris clarifies. "The ROMs are available, people who are into the Spectrum have probably got the ROMs anyway – Amstrad have already said back in the day, it's never been rescinded, about using them for emulation. So if you have your own ROM, be it one you've written yourself or one that you have previously owned, you can put that on the USB stick as well. And as long as they're put in the right place and called the right thing, the product will pick that up."

Why include such a capability? "We recognise that that's the reality of the world – whether we get involved or don't get involved in it, people will have these ROMs, and they'll have their own alternative ROMs that they've patched and stuff themselves," Chris explains. "So by allowing the users to use those, it's no skin off our neck, but it also means that we extend the compatibility to the nth degree, in effect. Games not working will usually be down to that they are calling silly things in the ROM which is like, 'Why would you call that?' But we don't need to solve that problem. The only way to solve that problem is to ship the official ROMs, and we can't."

Speaking of USB, the process of loading games on previous Retro Games Ltd systems has been criticised as rather finicky and this is

The Hobbit
In this classic illustrated text-adventure you guide Bilbo Baggins through Tolkien's third-age Middle Earth on a quest to find Smaug's treasure.
Interact with your environment using over 50 different actions and prepositions. Eat regularly to maintain strength. Use items and objects to progress.
1P
ALIEN
THE HOBBIT
Help
Saved games
Options
Favourite
Sort
Start game
The Spectrum

» [The Spectrum] As always with Retro Games Ltd machines, the presentation is nice and tidy.

> "IF YOU DON'T HAVE A CONTROLLER WITH IT, YOU'RE KIND OF INVITING THEM TO USE THE KEYBOARD"
>
> — CHRIS SMITH —

something that the team is looking to address. "What we're planning on doing is providing a USB stick image and a link to things like balenaEtcher and all that kind of stuff," says Chris. "We just basically say, here's a USB stick image. Put this on your USB sticks. Done. So we've tested it, and everyone's going to get a consistent experience. You know, we can put some file structure there, we just maybe stick the manual on the USB stick, all that kind of stuff." It's certainly a welcome prospect, after watching some of the struggles we've seen people have with The 400 Mini.

While Chris is evidently feeling the effects of jet lag following a last-minute trip to China to oversee manufacturing, his enthusiasm is evident. "We do this because we love it as well. You know, there's a big bit of nostalgia, it's not just a money-making business. We're in the retro community, we love what we do and I particularly love this machine. This product is where I learned everything – OK, the ZX81 went slightly before it, but it all kicked off with the Spectrum, really. Or up a level, anyway." Darren is equally pleased with what the team has done. "I think, as Chris said, we now have more staff and we operate more efficiently, and this machine is the one that we probably know better than anything else," he says. "That all said, it shouldn't diminish from the size of the task, which is immense – creating something almost virtually from standstill to release and getting it out in a year."

So now, The Spectrum isn't quite the mystifying machine that it was when we first learned about it, but it is shaping up to be one of the more enticing retro-gaming gifts over the holidays this year. We know how it's been made, and we've had a chance to try it for ourselves – all that's left is to give the finished machine a full review when it's ready for us to look at, so keep an eye on upcoming issues for that. ✱

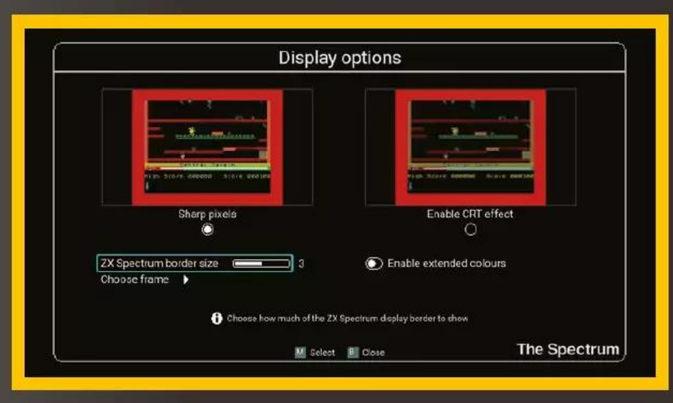
HANDS ON WITH THE SPECTRUM

WHAT KIND OF FIRST IMPRESSION DOES THIS NEW MACHINE MAKE?

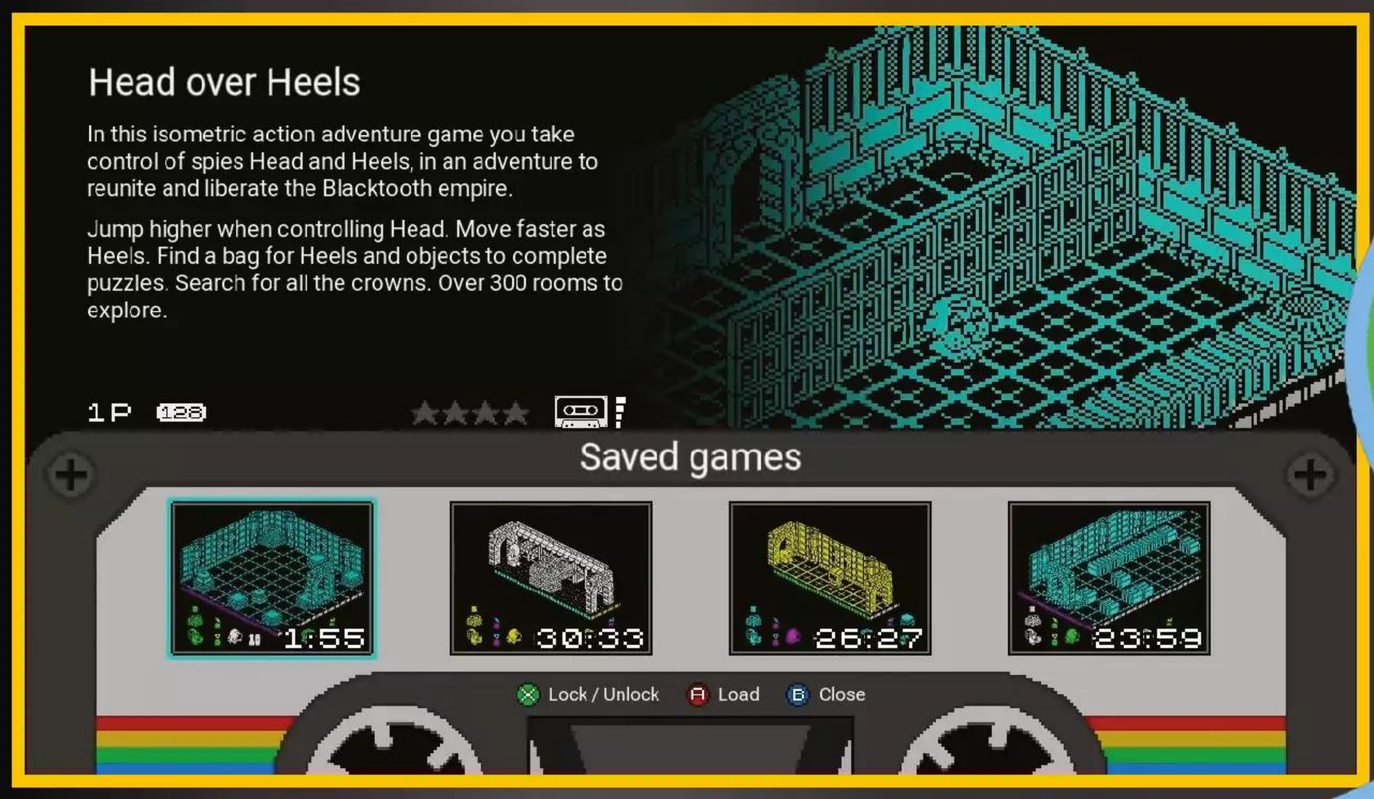
Ahead of the launch of The Spectrum in November, we were given the chance to spend some time with a prototype system for this feature. We should stress that it wasn't near final – while most of the system software features were available, we had a very limited selection of games to play and USB loading was disabled. As for the hardware itself, it already looks very similar to a real Spectrum but with the word 'Retro' replacing the classic Sinclair logo, and naturally a different set of ports on the back. However, we couldn't judge the keyboard as the final machine is set to have a number of production differences, of which the rubber is one, alongside differently coloured keyboard art.

Despite those caveats, we've liked what we've seen so far. Retro Games Ltd now has a good deal of experience with such systems and that shows here – the system interface feels like an evolution of what has gone before in The A500 Mini and The 400 Mini. The carousel is easy to navigate and has a variety of sorting options, and it's easy to see information such as a game's 48K/128K status and how many players it supports. We found the emulation to be solid across the games we had access to. You get four save states per game, which are easy to use, and it's possible to rewind gameplay too. One area in which we were hoping to maybe see some changes is in the visual options. You can employ a CRT filter, enable extended colours, crop the Spectrum's coloured borders and add wallpapers, but that's about it. However, that's to be expected given the speed at which this has been developed.

One thing we're pleased with at this stage is the ease of use. The only game that we encountered which had special controller mapping for the Retro Games Ltd controller (available for £19.99) was *Head Over Heels*, which assigned the jump, swap and carry commands to various face buttons on the controller. This felt like a well-considered addition to the game, and if other games benefit equally well from this feature, it may help bridge the gap for younger players who are used to playing with a pad. However, menu navigation felt rather better than on The 400 Mini, where the controller was authentic but a bit too clever for its own good with its hidden buttons.



» [The Spectrum] The visual options aren't overwhelming, but it'd be nice to have a bit more to tweak.


Head over Heels
In this isometric action adventure game you take control of spies Head and Heels, in an adventure to reunite and liberate the Blacktooth empire.
Jump higher when controlling Head. Move faster as Heels. Find a bag for Heels and objects to complete puzzles. Search for all the crowns. Over 300 rooms to explore.
1P
128
Saved games
1:55
30:33
26:27
23:59
Lock / Unlock
Load
Close

» [The Spectrum] The interface should be nice and familiar to anyone who has played a previous Retro Games system.

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CLASSIC MOMENTS

Mr Do!

» **PLATFORM:** ARCADE » **RELEASED:** 1982 » **DEVELOPER:** UNIVERSAL

One of the things you love about *Mr Do!* is the sheer versatility it offers when completing a stage. You can choose to either collect every single cherry on the screen, or if you fancy more of a challenge, attempt to clear each level of its enemies.

There's versatility in this too as you can go about your quest in two distinct ways – you can either use your trusty ball to take enemies out, or crush them with the apples dotted about each stage. While the ball is a lot of fun thanks to its sheer reach and the way it obliterates enemies on contact, it's slow to recharge, meaning you can be easily caught without it. Your best bet then is to use apples to gain the upper hand. It's not only satisfying to pull off, but will grant you far more points if you're able to kill several of your foes at once.

BIO

Often overshadowed by Namco's *Dig Dug*, we'd argue that *Mr Do!* is a far more nuanced offering. Its levels can be tackled in a variety of ways, there are numerous secrets to discover and it features much better music. Crafted by Universal's Kazutoshi Ueda in 1982, it's a stellar arcade gem that received numerous sequels in the intervening years. The arcade original remains our favourite however, and it's a shame that it never appears on modern compilations.

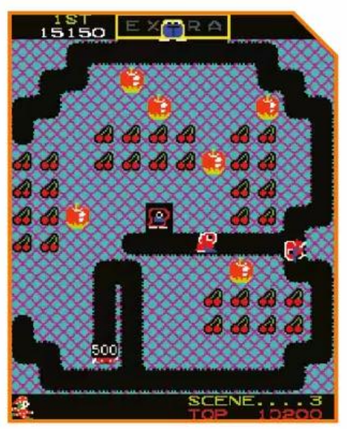
MORE CLASSIC MR DO! MOMENTS

A Real Baller

Yes you have to be careful when using Mr Do's power ball, but it's genuinely satisfying to see it ricochet through tunnels and then cause an immense explosion when it comes into contact with an enemy.

Scaled Success

Whenever you collect a cherry you'll hear a music note, collect all six cherries in quick succession and you'll hear a delightful scale of notes that would please any fan of *The Sound Of Music*.



Cutscene Time

Many maze games featured simple intermission cutscenes and *Mr Do!* was no different. Granted, the story it tells is just as basic as the one featured in *Pac-Man*, but it's still rather charming to watch.

Freeze Everything!

If you collect the piece of food that randomly appears on-screen you'll immediately freeze all your enemies. It triggers a new wave of foes though that will eat apples, so defeat them quickly or grab those remaining cherries.

THE MAKING OF Trivial Pursuit

IN 1986, A SMALL SOFTWARE HOUSE ON THE VERGE OF BANKRUPTCY LICENSED THE WORLD'S BIGGEST BOARD GAME FOR HOME COMPUTERS. IT CHANGED DOMARK – AND THE UK GAMES INDUSTRY – FOREVER

Words By Graeme Mason

IN THE KNOW

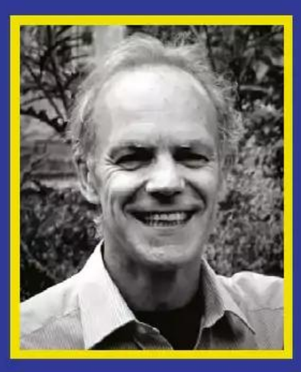
- **PUBLISHER:** DOMARK
- **DEVELOPER:** OXFORD DIGITAL ENTERPRISES
- **PLATFORM:** ZX SPECTRUM, AMSTRAD CPC, COMMODORE 64, AMIGA, BBC MICRO + MORE
- **RELEASED:** 1986
- **GENRE:** QUIZ/PUZZLE

Formed in 1984 by two advertising executives who had noticed how poorly computer games were often promoted, Domark's place in the games industry cannot be underestimated. But it almost didn't happen. "We did a game called *Eureka!*," begins Dominic Wheatley, the 'Do' or 'Dom' of Domark. "And it didn't do [the business] we thought it would do. We thought it would either be a big success and we'd make a fortune or nothing, and we'd go bankrupt." In the end, *Eureka!*, a graphic adventure set across time and written by Domark investor Ian Livingstone, did neither, despite frequent promotion, especially regarding its competition and an enormous £25,000 prize.

Undeterred, Dominic had a brainwave. Roger Moore's final outing as 007, *A View To A Kill*, was in the cinemas and proving popular despite its star's advancing years. Having acquired the rights to a home-computer version of the movie, Domark put all its promotional powers into gear, hiring Tigress Marketing and Softstone to design and program the game, respectively. *A View To A Kill* was decently received on the ZX Spectrum but savaged on the Commodore 64. "After the mega publicity, I thought this game was going to be something special. Unfortunately, it isn't… highly disappointing considering its hype," remarked an acerbic Julian Rignall in *Zzap!64* magazine.

A View To A Kill was Domark's sole release in 1985. "At this point, our company was seriously on the skids," says Dominic. "It was really grim stuff – my mother was paying my mortgage. But we still thought we were really onto something." Domark had gambled on *A View To A Kill* and, like *Eureka!* before it, it secured middling sales. Then, another timely brainwave. "My family and I were playing this board game at home all the time," he recalls. "So I wondered – could we license this too?"

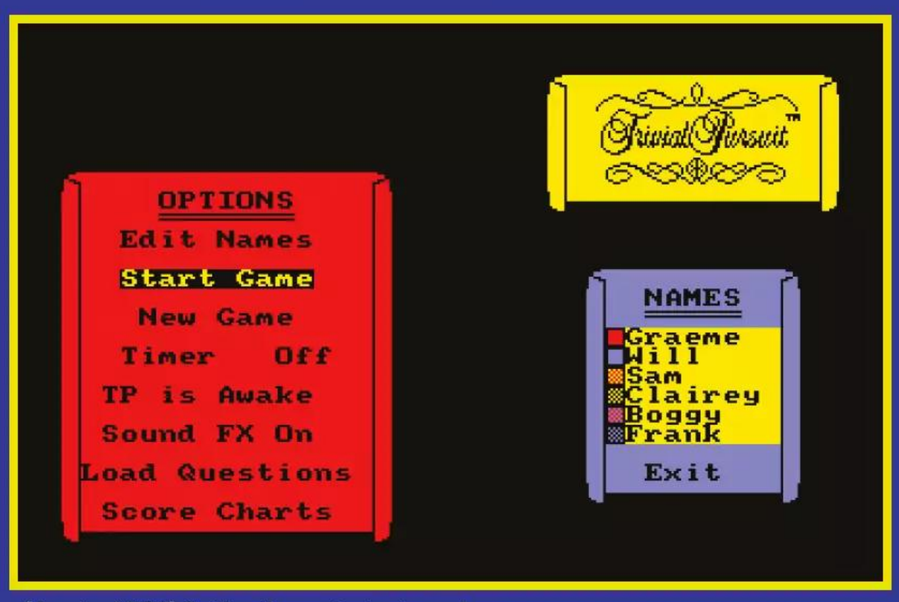
Six years earlier, two friends from Montreal, Canada, Chris Haney and Scott



» Oxford Digital Enterprises cofounder David Pringle.

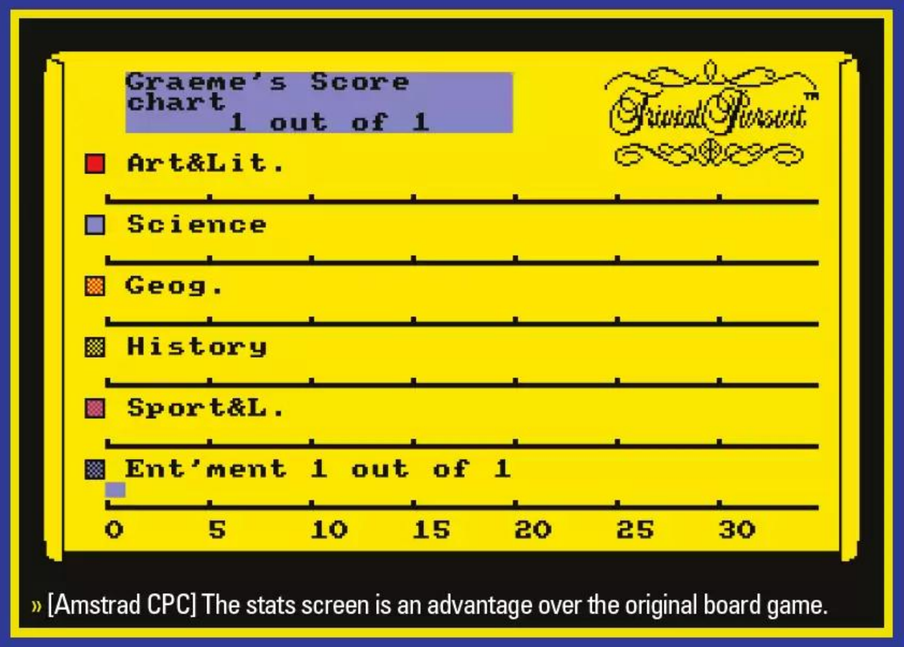
» Domark cofounder, Dominic Wheatley.

» [Amiga] The Amiga version uses a handy pointer.



» [Amstrad CPC] Getting the contestants ready.

Pursuit®



» [Amstrad CPC] The stats screen is an advantage over the original board game.

» [Atari 8-bit] TP is looking a little ill in the Atari 8-bit version.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SPLIT PERSONALITIES (PICTURED)

RELEASED: 1986

PLATFORM: C16, C64, ZX SPECTRUM, AMSTRAD CPC,

STAR WARS

RELEASED: 1987

PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS

APB

RELEASED: 1989

PLATFORM: ZX SPECTRUM, VARIOUS

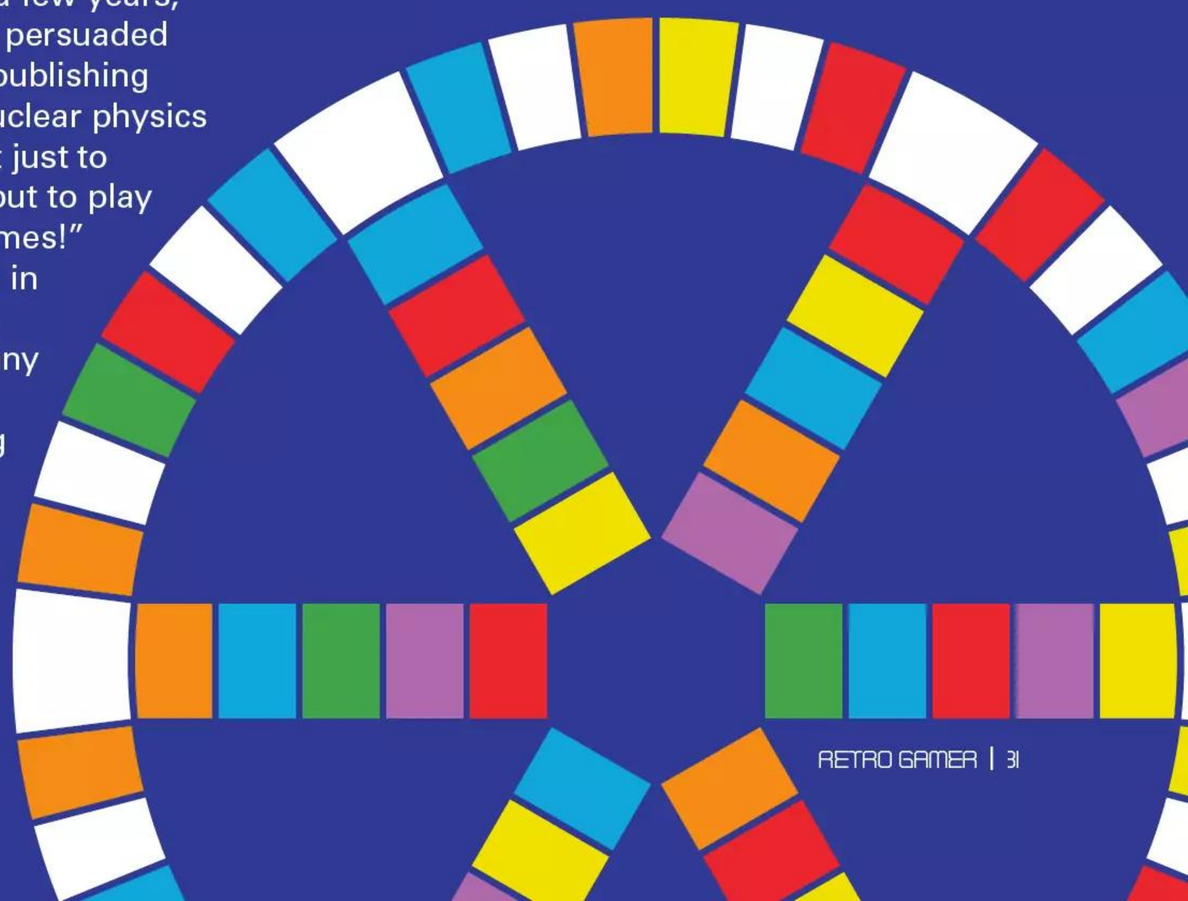
Abbot, had had their own magic lightbulb moment – a board game based around trivia questions. After creating a company, Horn Abbot, to market the game and attract investors, the pair unveiled *Trivial Pursuit* in 1981. By 1984, it had sold over 20 million units, putting it on the way to becoming one of the best-selling board games of all time. "They had a lawyer called Blake LeBlanc," remembers Dominic, "and we told him we had no money for anything upfront – but we could give them a royalty. And they agreed to do it."

However, despite its low-cost licence, Domark still needed cash to pay someone to develop *Trivial Pursuit* and its production costs. It was time to go cap in hand to the bank. "We managed to persuade our bank to give us an overdraft facility, and we got it up to £250,000," explains Dominic. "Our manager was an incredibly kind man, but as the year wore on, he became very nervous. But we knew the game was looking good."

Like many software houses in 1985, Domark had no in-house programming team. Dominic and his partner, Mark Strachan, relied on third-party creatives, whether single programmers or a development house. Explains Dominic, "We looked around for someone to develop the game, and David Bishop [who, as a part of Tigress Marketing, had helped develop *A View To A Kill*] knew someone called David Pringle and his company, Oxford Digital Enterprises (ODE). We met with David and explained our straightforward vision." Domark's idea was to use the computer to enhance the board game, showing maps and other pictures or playing music for the player to guess.

For several years, David Pringle had written for *Popular Computing Weekly* (under the pseudonym John Gowrie). "*PCW* was run by Duncan Scott, an old schoolmate of mine," recalls David. "After a few years, he saw gaming's potential and persuaded me to start a computer-game-publishing business. I was working in a nuclear physics lab, and we used PDP 11s – not just to acquire data for experiments, but to play *Lunar Lander* and other fun games!" The result was ODE, beginning in the spare bedrooms of David's cottage, with his girlfriend, Jenny Coles and nuclear physics graduate Gareth Blower joining Duncan and David. Its first game was a graphical text adventure based around Shakespeare's famous ▶

> "MY FAMILY AND I WERE PLAYING THIS BOARD GAME AT HOME ALL THE TIME... SO I WONDERED – COULD WE LICENSE THIS TOO?"
> *Dominic Wheatley*



Scottish play; its second was a strategy game based around the sunken Titanic. And now Dominic Wheatley was on the phone, asking David to visit West London and listen to a new game proposal.

David recalls the eventual meeting. "So, I arrived at [Domark's] offices in Wimbledon and met Dominic and Mark," he says. "After a few pleasantries, Dominic took a deep breath and said, 'David, we'd like you to do *Trivial Pursuit*.' I sat there dumbfounded. 'Are you familiar with it?' asked Dominic. 'Yes!' I replied. 'Will you do it?' said Dominic. 'Yes!' I replied." After a brief chat about how the board game would work in computerised form, David returned to Oxford. Given his effusive response, presumably, he *was* familiar with *Trivial Pursuit*? "There's no doubt that *Trivial Pursuit* was the Taylor Swift of board games in the Eighties," he laughs. "Everyone played it. Families rowed over it [made a change from arguing over *Monopoly* – Ed], and I used to get into stand-up fights over it with my brothers at Christmas. It was a viral sensation before that was a thing. So, yes, I knew it very well, as did most people."

While Domark had provided a basic outline to its game, it was only on the drive back to Oxford that David began to wonder how he and his team would approach converting the board game to home computers. "I realised it wasn't the simplest of propositions," he recalls. "There was no guidebook to help us convert it, and I'm not sure we bothered to do much research because the only comparable games were chess and draughts simulations, which were dead dull. But the *Trivial Pursuit* board game was so colourful and entertaining – we knew we had to keep that central to the game."

> "WE WERE ANXIOUS ABOUT HOW IT WAS GOING – THIS WAS LITERALLY MAKE OR BREAK FOR DOMARK"
> *Dominic Wheatley*

In ***Trivial Pursuit: The Computer Game*, up to six players compete for Wedges, answering specific questions on special squares throughout the game board.** The computer, via its avatar TP, is the host, asking written questions or presenting graphical and audio puzzles, all based on one of the game's six topics. After entering the player names – or just one if single-player, in which the questions are timed – players take turns, progressing around the board and gathering Wedges before heading to the central hub and answering one more question for victory. "There needed to be something extra to draw the player in; otherwise, it would just be a credible but boring translation," notes David.

ODE's team for *Trivial Pursuit*'s flagship versions – C64 and Spectrum – identified several elements, starting with David's point above. "That was the big question," he says. "How to add more interactivity and fun. It was natural to think of a sitting room setting where the game could take place, just like real life. But how to ask the questions?" This is where *Trivial Pursuit*'s star, the impish TP, comes in. "That was one zany idea that Domark wasn't sure about. I remember Dominic saying that TP looked like a 'hippie having a bad hair day'. They were keen on the idea of a host but felt they should look more like an Oxford don." Nevertheless, TP became a central part of *Trivial Pursuit*, asking questions, getting impatient with slow players, being sympathetic or brusque to wrong answers, and throwing darts at the board instead of rolling a die.

Aside from its quirky presenter, the biggest issue for ODE was how to present the game's questions. "It was obvious that typing the answers in was a non-starter because some people wouldn't be able to type and you'd have spelling mistakes," reveals David. "So it was either going to be multiple choice or an honour system." Both had drawbacks, but multiple choice presented an immediate problem for the small ODE team – they'd have to devise hundreds more 'answers'. Says David, "In the end, after months with a fair bit of shouting, we chose the honour system."

In the finished game, TP asks a question, and players give their reply before the host reveals the answer. Single players could obviously cheat their way to victory quickly. "Actually, no one mentioned that as an issue on launch, and it saved us hundreds of hours," says David. As a standalone game, likely sold to fans of the original board game, ODE also devised ▶

Conversion Capers

RETRO GAMER LOOKS BACK AT THE MAIN VERSIONS OF TRIVIAL PURSUIT

ZX SPECTRUM

As one of the original versions, it's disappointing that ODE didn't change the Spectrum's boring old typeface. Otherwise, the digitised board replicates *Trivial Pursuit*'s nicely, although its size means it's sometimes difficult to discern whose turn it is.

COMMODORE 64

The board here feels less cramped and helpfully tells you whose turn it is. While TP's clicking feet can grind a little, he's well-animated and zips nicely between the screens. Its extra flourishes and better tunes give the C64 the edge over the other 8-bit versions.

AMSTRAD CPC

Trivial Pursuit is a treat for Amstrad fans – even more so if they like the original board game. It's similar to the C64 game, with brighter colours, random objects appearing on the shelves around the fireplace, and TP gurgling like the little imp he is.

AMIGA

ODE's 16-bit update is similar in gameplay to the C64 version – but what have they done with TP? The cute and bumbling character from the 8-bit games is gone, replaced by some weird man-thing in a nappy. Sadly, it eviscerates much of the charm of the game.

ATARI ST

Again, TP has changed, this time into a rotund and rather smug-looking college professor. He's also not particularly well-animated, but these grumblings aside, this is much the same as the other versions, although 16-bit owners had a right to expect a little extra.

» [BBC Micro] Because they lost the FA Cup. Seems a bit unfair.

» [C64] TP's got his own box to stand on in the C64 game.

» [Atari ST] A somewhat different look to TP for the Atari ST game.

» [Atari ST] Grymb secures a Wedge and is on their way to victory.

MSX

■ The MSX game mimics the Spectrum version, with added warbling from TP and better tunes. It's slower, however, which sucks a lot of fun out of its play, and while another competent interpretation of the board game, it's probably the weakest of the 8-bits.

ATARI 8-BIT

■ This is a strange iteration of *Trivial Pursuit*. Most noticeably, TP is totally green, giving him a queasy, troll-like appearance. Otherwise, it includes those random items that appear on the shelves in the living room and is perfectly serviceable, if a little chuggy in places.

PC

■ TP's shrill chirruping maxes out here, which doesn't help enjoyment. There's a neat, old-fashioned, rustic feel to the living room, but in truth, it doesn't look great and the whole game feels like something of an afterthought from Domark.

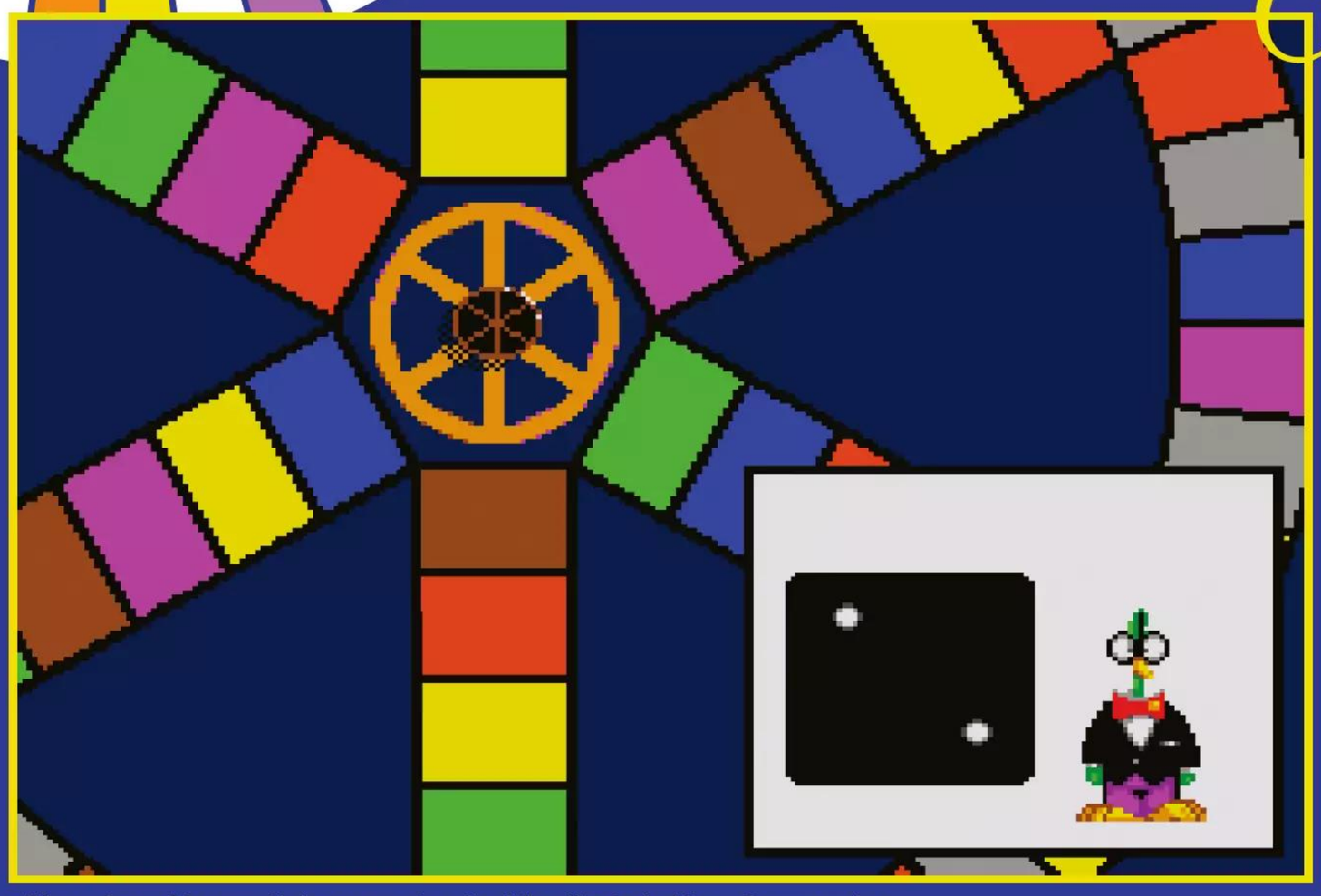
BBC MICRO

■ The sound effects are good here, but poor TP looks like he's spent too much time on the beach. The garish red-and-yellow palette repeats everywhere else, and while all the questions are present, along with the MSX game, it's the poorest of the 8-bit versions.

MASTER SYSTEM

■ Domark's development partner, Teque, was behind this 1992 console version. TP is gone, replaced by the Earthworm Jim-alike Russell, and there's a significant graphical overhaul. If you only play one quiz game on your Master System, this is the one to go for.

» [ZX Spectrum] Gordon's lack of *Upstairs Downstairs* knowledge has let him down again.



» [Master System] A zoomed-in but accurate board and die rolling for the Master System version.

▶ a completely new set of questions, another high-pressure assignment given the consistently high standard of the board game's trivia. Of course, everything had to be run by Domark. "[ODE] took our brief and actually did a very good job," recalls Dominic. "Every two weeks, we'd pop to Oxford with a couple of crates of beer and have a review in the evening with them. We were anxious about how it was going – this was literally make or break for Domark."

While ODE continued developing, Mark and Dominic pondered how to elevate their game to 'premium product' status. Strapped for cash, the pair decided to wine and dine Anne Dixon of Book Club Associates to get *Trivial Pursuit* the coveted Game Of The Month award, the title sent automatically to members when they forgot to reply. "We took [Anne] out to the best restaurant in Mayfair and were freaking out because it was so expensive!" grins Dominic. "The wine waiter came over, and all I knew was that Chablis was a good wine, so I looked down this enormous list, and there was a bottle at £26. He came back with a bottle and just flipped it in front of me before starting to move off to open it. But something just clicked, and I asked to look at it again – the one he'd brought over wasn't the one I'd ordered. It cost over £750! [approx £2,300 today] We ended up having three bottles – our credit cards would have exploded!" Nevertheless, it was the last of the Domark money. Fortunately, the entertaining worked, and Book Club Associates ordered 120,000 copies of *Trivial Pursuit*. Even at a special bulk price of £3.50,

Trivial Sequels

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF DOMARK'S TRIVIAL PURSUIT SERIES

TRIVIAL PURSUIT: THE BABY BOOMER EDITION

■ ODE and Domark cleverly released two versions of this follow-up – one an expansion that loaded into the original *Genus* edition and a standalone game, which was naturally more expensive. With its questions aimed at people now approaching middle age, critics inevitably pondered how many Spectrum game players fitted into its demographic.

TRIVIAL PURSUIT: YOUNG PLAYERS EDITION

■ As per *The Baby Boomer Edition*, this 1987 game came in two forms: expansion and standalone. Its target audience is much more logical, with most questions aimed at eight and sixteen-year-olds. Nevertheless, the format is identical, and fans were starting to pine for a genuine update.

TRIVIAL PURSUIT: A NEW BEGINNING

■ Domark's total revamp came in 1988. While the core gameplay remains the same, there's a graphical overhaul and a vague background mission of exploring other worlds. For those wanting the quaint board game feeling, disappointment is guaranteed; if you're not bothered, it's another engaging quiz game.

» [MSX] In addition to the English versions, ODE translated *Trivial Pursuit* into other languages.

» [Master System] Thanks Russell, nothing like a confident boost.

the deal ensured a welcome cash injection into Domark.

But ODE was still struggling back in Oxford, specifically with its quaint host. "The issue of TP ran and ran," laments David. "Time was getting tight, and Domark had secured some pretty big distribution deals. We didn't have a good beta to show them, and Dominic, quite rightly, was getting a bit testy." It was time for a mega-crunch, with the developer sprinting towards the finish line at the end of a very long fortnight of panic and worry. Everyone at ODE loved TP's cute mannerisms and the humour he brought to the game. But Domark wasn't convinced. "On the last evening, someone decided to give TP a fat tummy and make him bobble up and down as he moved along," says David. "We were in hysterics, and it made it into the beta I took down to Domark." The trick worked. "Dominic produced this broad grin and said, 'You've cracked it!' *Trivial Pursuit* was approved based on a Jocky Wilson-sized stomach thrown in over the last 24 hours." Duly relieved, everybody decamped to Domark's local. "Dominic promptly requested, 'A very large glass of your strongest wine!'" laughs David.

Trivial Pursuit proved to be the sizeable hit Domark needed, with critics applauding the game's entertaining mix of comedy and trivia. The sleepless nights at ODE HQ, devising hundreds of questions and adding gameplay elements such as the player scoreboard, paid dividends, with most magazines awarding *Trivial Pursuit* a generous score. "In those early days, every review was pored over and analysed," recalls David. "There was one poor review [of *Trivial Pursuit*] that started, 'I don't like board games translated onto computer…' – I think we put that up and used it as a dart board!"

"Long story short, it was a massive seller," beams Dominic, "and we sold bucket loads at £14.95, albeit about £6 retail." For Dominic and Mark, it validated their persistence in game publishing. "The seminal moment was when we went back to our bank. We teased that poor nice man that it had all gone wrong before putting the cheque down and asking him to put it into our account." The pair then presented the manager with a reproduction of HM Bateman's famous *The Man Who Paid Off His Overdraft* cartoon, replacing the man with caricatures of themselves. Then, mercifully, they took the fellow out to lunch.

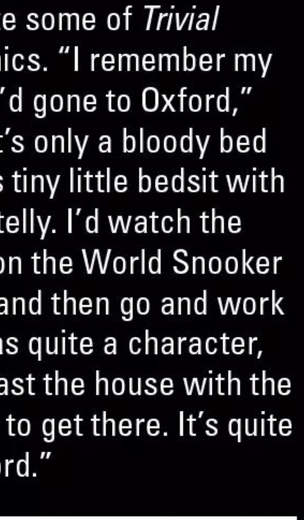
> "IT GOT US NOTED; WE WERE ON OUR WAY. LIKE ALL GAME COMPANIES, WE NEEDED THAT FIRST HIT TO FILL THE COFFERS"
> *Dominic Wheatley*

***Trivial Pursuit*'s impressive box, imitating the board game and twin cassettes, made the game one of the most expensive on the shelves – just like the board game.** "[ODE] got their cheques, and everybody won," grins Dominic. "It got us noted; we were on our way. Like all game companies, we needed that first hit to fill the coffers." Back at ODE, *Trivial Pursuit*'s expansive potential ensured work for at least the next two years – work made substantially more straightforward with its UnilODE/Uniload system, enabling ODE to easily compile additional question packs. "It was just great fun but also crazily time-consuming," notes David. "I mean, to go from concept to implementation in five or six months… often there weren't any free weekends. It was seven-days-a-week craziness." For Domark, the time of huge overdrafts, disappointing sales and family loans was over. "The money we made from *Trivial Pursuit* bought us new offices, *Star Wars* and a billion-dollar company," says Dominic. "And it could have gone so badly wrong!" ✱

Our thanks to Dominic Wheatley and David Pringle for their time. To read more about the Domark story, check out Retro Gamer's From The Archives inside issue 96.

QUESTION: WHICH FAMOUS 16-BIT DEVELOPER-TO-BE FIRST FREELANCED ON TRIVIAL PURSUIT?

ANSWER: JON HARE. DID YOU GET IT RIGHT?



» Before cofounding Sensible Software, Jon Hare worked on *Trivial Pursuit*'s graphics.

■ As **Retro Gamer** talks to Jon Hare, England manager Gareth Southgate has just resigned. "I think it's good timing from him," admits Jon. "We've all criticised him for some of his decisions, but some people have been disproportionately negative to the guy. I mean, I remember when we didn't qualify for the World Cup twice in a row!" Eight years after England's dismal 1978 World Cup qualification campaign, Jon found himself working for ODE. "I got commissioned to do a game called *RMS Titanic*, to do some Commodore 64 graphics," he says. At the time, he worked for a local Essex company, LT Software; after Jon and Chris Yates cofounded Sensible Software in March 1986, David Pringle remembered the young artist and called him back to work on ODE's latest project. Based out of a bed and breakfast, Jon returned to Oxford in May to contribute some of *Trivial Pursuit*'s living room graphics. "I remember my mum was proud because I'd gone to Oxford," he laughs. "I said, 'Mum, it's only a bloody bed and breakfast!' I sat in this tiny little bedsit with literally a bed and a small telly. I'd watch the snooker – Joe Johnson won the World Snooker Championship that year – and then go and work in David's house. David was quite a character, and I remember walking past the house with the shark hanging out the roof to get there. It's quite a famous landmark in Oxford."

Zaxxon

SUPER-CHARGED SCRAMBLE

» ARCADE » 1982 » SEGA

There's a lot of iteration within the videogame industry with developers taking an existing concept and expanding it with their own ideas, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

While many feel that the games of today can feel too homogenous (which isn't surprising when you consider the cost that goes into making them) it's easy to forget that this isn't a new thing in games.

Space Invaders, *Pac-Man* and *Pong* saw countless clones after they debuted, but just as many developers were keen to take those existing winning formulas and expand on them in new ways. You could argue that *Galaxian* is a far better game than *Space Invaders* due to its use of colour sprites and dive-bombing enemies, or that *Ms Pac-Man* is better than *Pac-Man* because it contains more interesting mazes to roam. Thankfully, for all their tweaked mechanics, both games still feel extremely similar to the games that inspired them.

Zaxxon on the other hand takes things to far greater extremes and feels far more ambitious than the game that clearly inspired it. At its heart, *Zaxxon* is nothing more than a spin on Konami's *Scramble* – there are ground bases to destroy, fuel can bafflingly be restored by shooting fuel canisters, while the scenery changes the further you get into the game.

So far, so *Scramble*, but *Zaxxon*'s biggest trump cards is its isometric viewpoint which makes it look light years ahead of its competitor (even though just a year separates them) and a new mechanical wrinkle in the form of an altimeter which adds an additional level of strategy, as you now have to duck or soar over enemy installations.

It all culminates in a game that plays as good as it looks and while it's not quite as instantly accessible as Konami's game, it still manages to be a gripping blaster that probably wouldn't have existed without Konami taking those first tentative steps. ✱

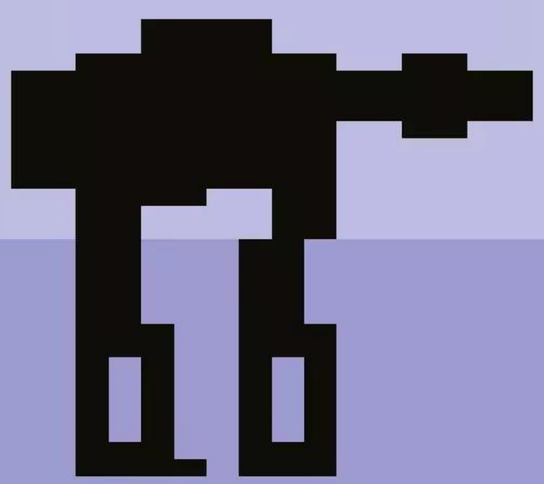
SEGA
FUEL

THE RETRO GAMER GUIDE TO...

PARKER BROS

BY USING ITS CONTACTS IN THE ENTERTAINMENT SECTOR AND FORMIDABLE MARKETING CLOUT, **PARKER BROTHERS** BROUGHT TITLES LIKE STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, SPIDER-MAN AND FROGGER TO THE ATARI 2600 AND ITS RIVALS. **RETRO GAMER** HIGHLIGHTS THE FIRM'S BEST RELEASES

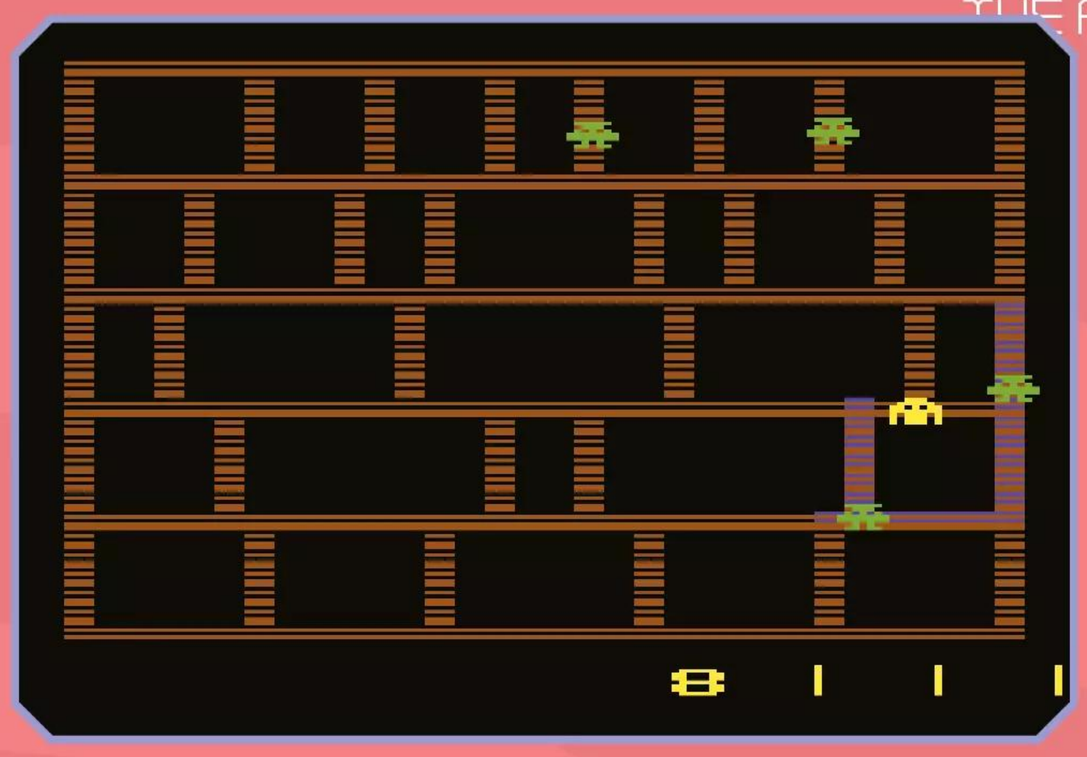
Words by Rory Milne



From its earliest releases onwards, Parker Brothers set its stall out as a producer of licence-based videogames. Parker started 1982 with convincing Atari 2600 adaptations of the hit Konami coin-ops *Amidar* and *Frogger*. Its other titles for the year included the hugely successful *Star Wars* shooter for the 2600 and Intellivision *The Empire Strikes Back*, and a popular videogame adaptation of *Spider-Man*.

1983 saw Parker bring Nintendo's arcade platformer *Popeye* to the Atari 2600 and a raft of other platforms, and in the same year the firm built on its earlier successes with arcade and *Star Wars* licensed titles. To this end, it published home versions of coin-ops such as Nintendo's twitch reaction-based *Sky Skipper*, Konami's side-scrolling helicopter shooter *Super Cobra* and Gottlieb's smash hit cube colourer *Q*bert*. On the *Star Wars* side, Parker brought *Star Wars: Jedi Arena* to the 2600 and *Return Of The Jedi: Death Star Battle* to a number of different systems. Parker then tweaked this proven approach during 1984. Its only *Star Wars* releases of the year were its highly successful ports of Atari's arcade game adaptation of the first movie, while other notable 1984 Parker titles included home versions of Konami's arcade shooter *Gyruss*, its home-exclusive sequel *Frogger II: ThreeeDeep!* and its original platformer *Montezuma's Revenge*.

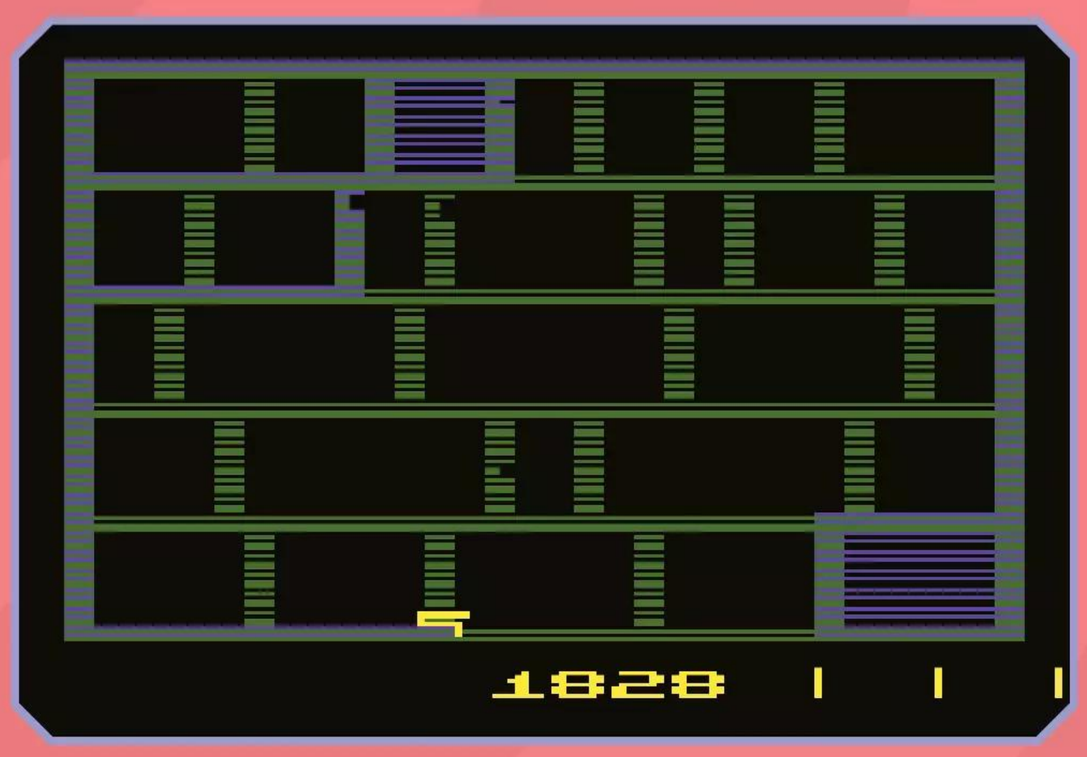
Parker Brothers was then bought over and renamed in 1985, but before the sale it had one last hurrah in the form of Atari 2600 and ColecoVision adaptations of the coin-op sequel *Q*bert's Qubes*. ✱



AMIDAR 1982

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

Surreal narratives in videogames were far from unusual in the early Eighties. In *Amidar*, we get some stages where gorillas are chased by warriors and others where paint rollers get harassed by pigs. Of course, there's a lot more to Parker's conversion of Konami's coin-op, starting with its playfield of interconnected rectangles, each of which your great ape or sentient decorating product is tasked with colouring in. In either protagonist's case, this is done by moving around the sides of each rectangle, all while avoiding the attentions of the aforementioned warriors and pigs. The snag here is that these opponents can move faster than the game's unlikely heroes, but a clever mechanic allows you to employ some strategy. When an enemy is moving towards you, as long as there's a corner between you and them then they will take that corner rather than continuing in a straight line, leaving you unharmed. Put another way, as long as you can keep putting right or left turns between you and your aggressors then you get left alone. A second, slightly cruder, defence allows you to temporarily turn your enemies into shadows, which lets you walk right through them. Last, but not least, when you've coloured in the last of the four corner rectangles on a stage your foes turn into chickens and the tables are turned, meaning that you can chase and catch them for points for a short while instead of fleeing from them. In terms of how Parker's Atari 2600 adaptation stacks up to the arcade original, there are some obvious concessions with its audio and visuals. There are very few sound effects and the music from the coin-op is missing, but in all honestly that can be quite grating. The 2600 version's graphics are less well defined than the arcade game's, but they do the job just as well. More importantly, the original's gameplay is all there, with the exception of its perfunctory bonus stages – and the chickens mentioned earlier are exclusive to Parker's home version!



FROGGER 1982

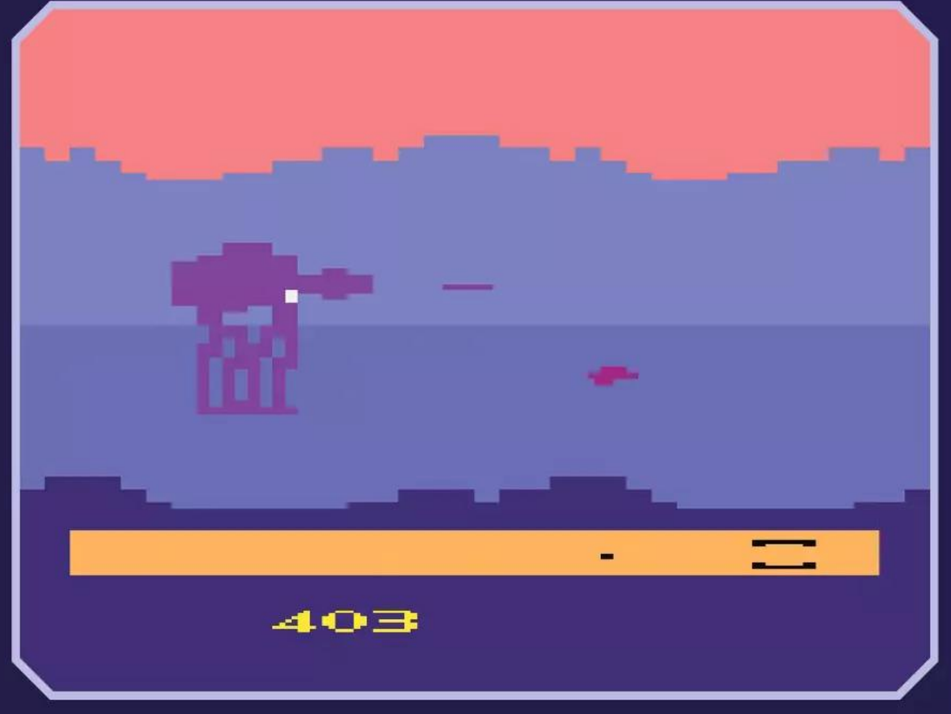
ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

With four million copies sold on the Atari 2600 alone, *Frogger* was by far the most successful videogame released by Parker Brothers. What's interesting about its popularity is that this wasn't dampened by the fact that there are so many ways for its amphibian hero to die. Poor Frogger has to first cross a ridiculously busy five-lane motorway on his way to a riverbank, where at times he has to avoid venomous snakes. He then has to cross a physics-defying river that somehow flows in opposite directions at the same time. The river's rapids mean that he can't swim across, so instead he has to hop onto a row of passing turtles, although these can dive at any time, leaving Frogger to drown if he doesn't quickly jump forwards onto a log floating in the other direction from the turtles. Hopping between further turtles, floating logs and even alligators – providing he avoids their snapping jaws, gives him a slim chance of reaching the far side of the river. That said, even when that's within touching distance he still has to beware of hungry alligators lurking in the reed beds he calls home. Unique to Parker's versions is a feature that allows Frogger to float off one side of the river and safely appear at the other side, although this is only in the easiest mode. Floating off-screen in the home versions' more difficult modes means instant death. On the bright side, rescuing lady frogs and munching flies found on Frogger's home bases gets you bonus points. ▶

STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK 1982

ATARI 2600, INTELLIVISION

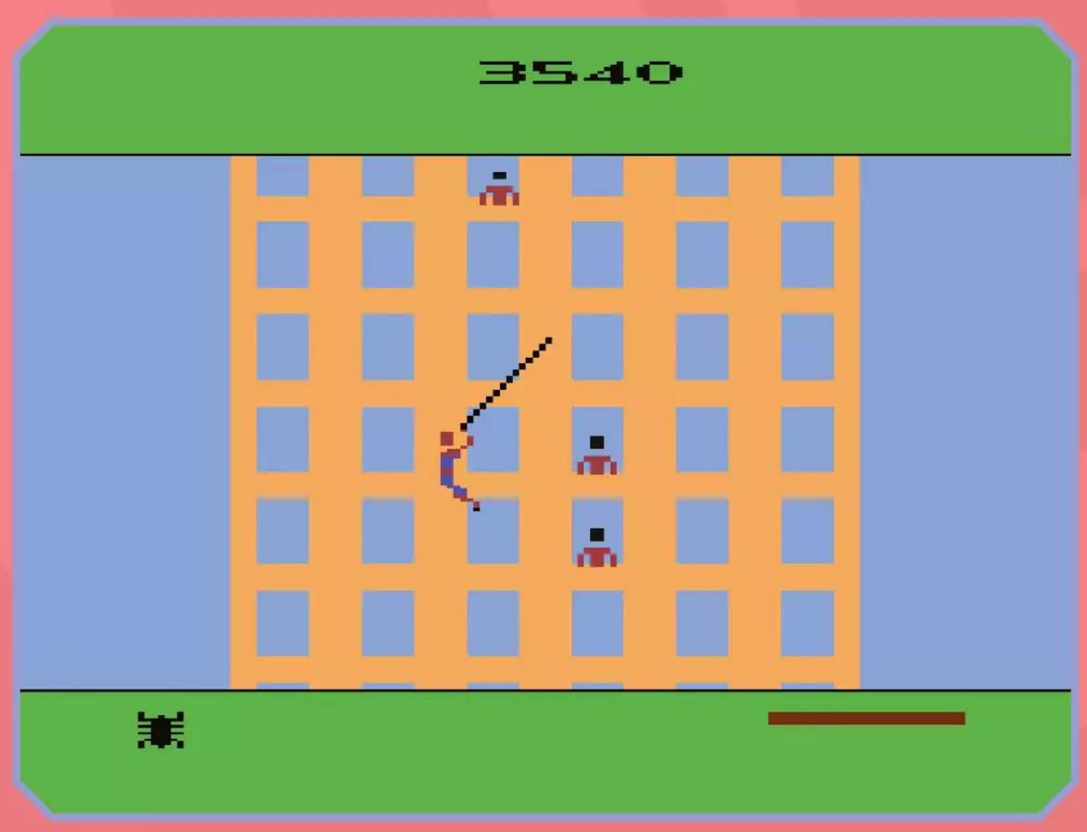
■ Arguably, *Star Wars* was the hottest movie series of the late-Seventies and early Eighties. By 1981, when Parker Brothers made plans to enter the home videogames market, it already had a history of licensing the films for toys and board games. This meant that it had the contacts required to secure the rights to adapt the popular movies into a series of videogames, and its first attempt was *The Empire Strikes Back*. *Empire* puts you in the seat of Luke Skywalker's snowspeeder as he goes into the Battle Of Hoth. As in the movie, the objective is to take down gigantic AT-AT walkers, which somewhat resemble huge metal four-legged animals. As with so many arcade-inspired Eighties games, there is no way to actually win the battle, instead it's a high-score chase until your final breath. *Empire* is a side-scrolling shooter, where only shots to the AT-ATs' heads and torsos count. Multiple successful shots are indicated by the vast killing machines changing colour and then finally exploding. Alternatively, a single shot to a weak spot that occasionally appears on the AT-AT's shoulder will instantly dispatch them. Your speeder also changes hue as it takes damage from the AT-AT's return fire, although you can land and repair it at the cost of being defenceless while doing so. As you progress through the levels, things are made more difficult for you by the AT-ATs. They increase the speed that they march towards the rebel base, which of course is their objective, and is an action that ends the game. They can become impossible to fly alongside without taking damage, limiting you to either flying under or over them. The AT-AT's also launch smart bombs that follow you around the screen. You get rewarded with the Force for avoiding these for two minutes, which makes you invulnerable for 20 seconds. ▶



POPEYE 1983

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

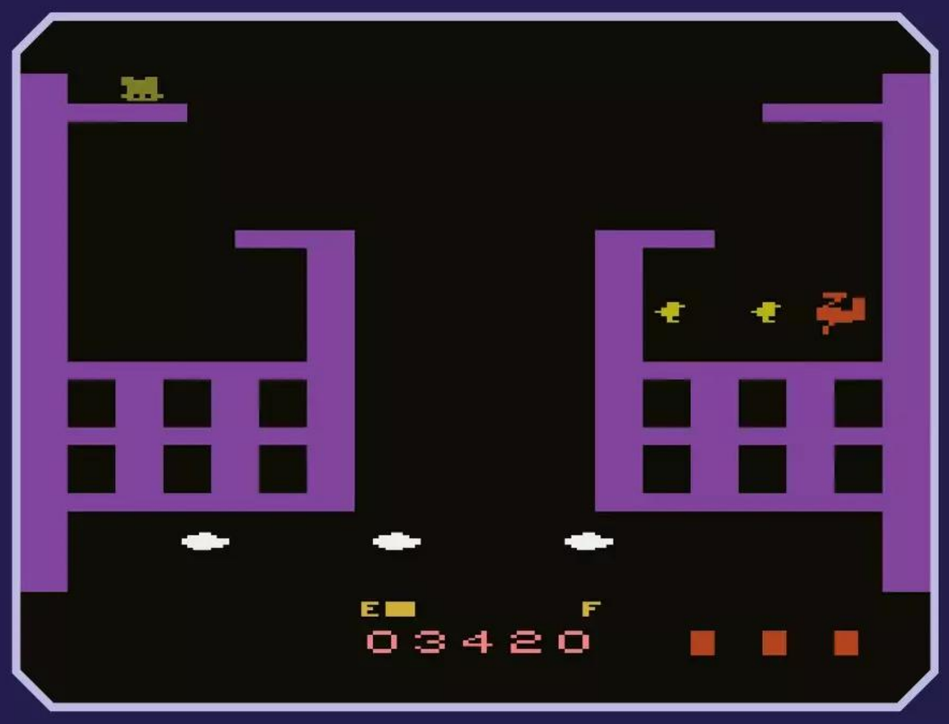
■ Considering that Shigeru Miyamoto's *Popeye* coin-op ran on then-cutting-edge hardware, Parker's home versions were always going to be a compromise. They do, however, ably adapt the majority of the arcade game's visuals, tunes and gameplay. The objective is to catch hearts, notes and letters dropped by Olive Oyl, which is made trickier by Popeye's rival Brutus attacking him and other foes chucking deadly projectiles at him. There's no platforming in the game's three stages, but there are steps to climb up and down levels, moving platforms, and see-saws that propel Popeye into the air. Of course, there's also spinach to collect that lets you turn the tables on Brutus.



SPIDER-MAN 1983

ATARI 2600, ODYSSEY 2

■ The Parker Brothers *Spider-Man* game has the Marvel hero scaling the Empire State Building, the lower levels of which are occupied by the Green Goblin's henchmen. You apprehend these foes by swinging into them, but if Spidey's web comes into contact with one of them then they cut it, leaving him to fall to his death. However, you can always spin another, and providing it snags the wall of the building then he's free to fight on. The greater objective is to reach the top of the New York landmark using limited webbing, where the Goblin has planted bombs that you need to defuse. After working your way past him and on to the top of the building, you find a Super-Bomb. Stop this from exploding and it's on to the next stage. There are several of these, and as you progress the Empire State Building inexplicably gets taller, the Green Goblin makes more appearances per level and you're given less web fluid.



SKY SKIPPER 1983

ATARI 2600

Based on an obscure Nintendo arcade game, Parker's Atari 2600 conversion of *Sky Skipper* is more of an adaptation than a faithful copy. As with the coin-op, the 2600 title has gorilla guards that you have to bomb, which as well as stunning them releases trapped animals from cages. You have to rescue these using a biplane, which isn't as easy as it sounds, as any contact with the walls next to the cage doors proves fatal. Additionally, the creatures you're trying to rescue get returned to their cages as soon as their gorilla guard comes to, which means you have to knock him out again before launching another rescue attempt. You have to do all of this while avoiding deadly clouds and trying not to run out of fuel, and unlike the coin-op there's no refuelling. To balance this out, the gorillas in the 2600 version don't run and jump around the screen or throw projectiles at you. In terms of level design differences, the original has fairly wide open stages, whereas the Parker Brothers adaptation makes a feature of having to negotiate tight spaces and turn your biplane on a dime to avoid crashing into things.

SUPER COBRA 1983

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

Konami's spiritual successor to *Scramble* is slightly less well known than the game that it took its inspiration from, but thanks to Parker's *Super Cobra* conversions, the side-scrolling semi-sequel has a much higher profile than it might have had otherwise. The extent to which the coin-op is accurately replicated by Parker's home versions depends greatly on the differing capabilities of the systems it was adapted for, but each version delivers the core gameplay of the arcade original. *Super Cobra* challenges you to navigate a heavily armed helicopter past the stalagmites and stalactites of a treacherously confined cave system, all while trading bombs and bullets with enemies. Their assault involves dropping mines from the cave roofs, firing rockets and artillery at you from the cave floors and sending fireballs flying at you from all directions. You start with limited fuel to complete your 11-level mission, and in a rather counterintuitive move, you have to blow up fuel tanks to replenish your precious supply.

Q*BERT 1983

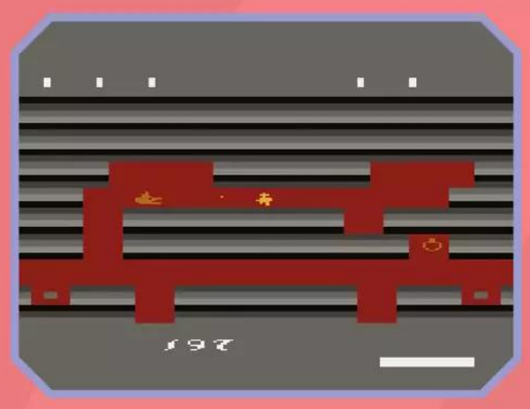
ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

For its time, Gottlieb's coin-op *Q*bert* had beautifully rendered high-resolution graphics, and those were never going to be perfectly replicated on the home systems of the day. With that said, Parker's home adaptations still capture the essence of the arcade game they're based on. For those that don't know, Q*bert's mission is to hop around a pyramid built of isometric cubes, changing the colour of their top sides while avoiding snakes, bouncing balls and other oddities, and occasionally freezing them with power-ups. You have escape routes in the form of two single-use spinning disks, which fly the hero to the top of the pyramid and out of the way of immediate danger. Parker's 2600 version has far less detailed visuals than the arcade game, a few less cubes for its protagonist to colour and lacks the coin-op's gravity-defying foes Ugg and Wrongway, but in all other respects it nails the feel of the arcade original. Parker's adaptations for more capable systems play equally well and have better graphics, and they reinstate the cubes and characters missing from their 2600 counterpart.

REACTOR 1983

ATARI 2600

As with the Gottlieb coin-op, the fixed-screen playfield in Parker's conversion has an expanding nuclear core at its centre and a deadly wall that contains it. You have to manoeuvre your craft within the gap between the two, avoiding the wall and in later levels the unshielded core. This is made all the more difficult by particles that try to bounce you into these hazards, and your best defence is to bounce them into oblivion first. Your greater goal is to make them collide with two sets of control rods mounted to the wall. Destroying one set temporarily shrinks the core, destroying both sets reduces it too, but this additionally gives you an extra decoy. A decoy can be deployed in key positions where particles will bounce off it instead of your craft until it burns out. There are also chambers that you can knock particles into for bonus points. To Parker's credit, the 2600 *Reactor* faithfully replicates the coin-op's gameplay. It plays part of its title tune between reactor shutdowns too. Its one failing is that its graphics look quite basic compared to the arcade original.



TUTANKHAM 1983

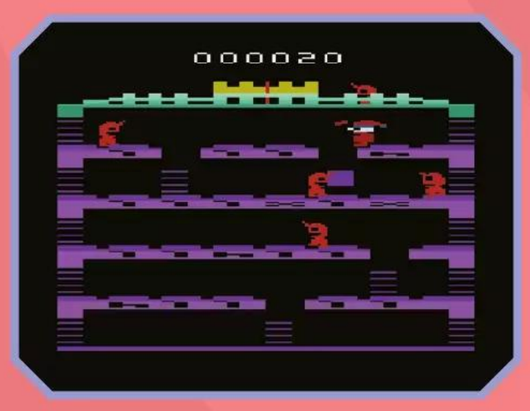
ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

Konami's maze shooter can be seen as a one-player predecessor to *Gauntlet*, although its enemy generators only produce small numbers of foes and aren't destructible. As with *Gauntlet*, you collect keys that unlock exits, and use teleports to reach certain sections of the levels. Parker's Intellivision, ColecoVision and VIC-20 adaptations are quite faithful to the coin-op, but with less impressive aesthetics. Its challenging Atari 2600 version is more like an interpretation that scrolls vertically instead of horizontally. It also limits its generators to hatching one foe at a time, and its more confined mazes typically have just one route through them, with detours to search for treasure and keys.

STAR WARS: JEDI ARENA 1983

ATARI 2600

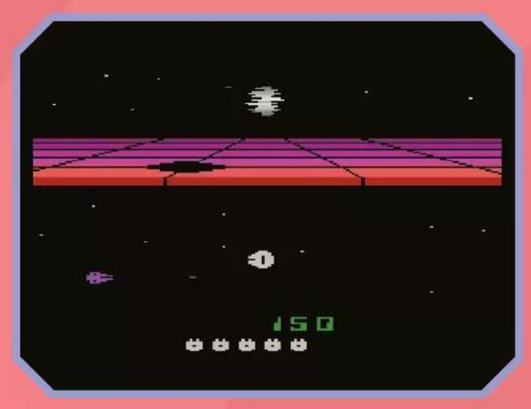
Based on Luke Skywalker's training session in the original *Star Wars* movie, Jedi Arena tasks you with deflecting laser blasts fired from a hovering drone. To spice things up, a second Jedi stands opposite you, directing the drone's lasers at you as you do the same to them. When either of you is hit your shields are depleted. The aim of the game is to still have some shield left at the point that your opponent loses the last remnants of theirs. You then just need a direct hit to your rival to win a point, and then two more points to win the game.



MR DO!'S CASTLE 1984

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

Parker's platforms and ladders-based coin-op conversion has Mr Do dodging angry unicorns while dislodging blocks onto their heads with his hammer! This is best done after trapping them in holes, as it's harder to hit a moving target. As well as flattening unicorns, bashing blocks gets you cherries and keys, and by taking three keys to the top level your hammer temporarily becomes lethal. Of all Parker's conversions, the Atari 2600 adaptation resembles the coin-op the least, but it deserves special mention for its in-game music and implementation of the original's mechanics on far less capable hardware.



STAR WARS: RETURN OF THE JEDI: DEATH STAR BATTLE 1983

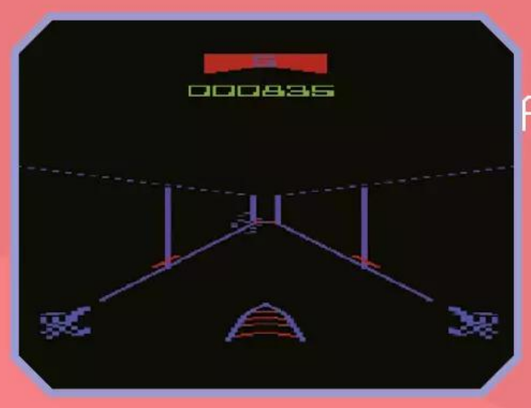
ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

Another Parker Brothers *Star Wars* original, *Death Star Battle* has you piloting the Millennium Falcon on a mission to destroy a series of Death Stars. The game's first stage has you picking off ships from the Empire's fleet while you wait for an opening to appear in a deadly forcefield. Passing through an opening takes you to within firing distance of a Death Star, which is defended by more of the Empire's forces. The Death Star also defends itself with the mother of all laser beams. Your objective is to shoot a path through the Death Star to its reactor. Once targeted, the reactor triggers an explosion that you have to avoid the fallout from before starting a new mission on the outskirts of another Death Star's forcefield.

GYRUSS 1984

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

The Atari 2600 *Gyruss* has no right to look or sound as good as it does, but by playing to the system's strengths Parker Brothers produced a shooter that's a thing of beauty in spite of only vaguely resembling Konami's hit coin-op. Its enemy craft may not look that special in static screenshots, but they're far more impressive in full motion. Rather than trying to adjust for the flicker that occurs when more ships are on-screen than the 2600 is capable of displaying, Parker instead opted to use that flickering to make the enemy craft appear to shimmer. This clever visual effect is achieved by cycling the colours of the ships between bright and dark shades of the hue they're rendered in. The 2600 *Gyruss* has an equally accomplished in-game soundtrack; it's one of the best examples of 2600 music out there. Of course, all of this aesthetic splendour would count for nothing if the gameplay wasn't there, but thankfully the 2600 version of *Gyruss* is fast and furious, especially on the harder difficulty settings. So much so that it makes Parker's adaptations for more powerful systems seem tame by comparison. For those unfamiliar with *Gyruss*, it tasks you with dispatching waves of spaceships that attack in tight circular formations as you travel between planets. You circle around your foes at a higher altitude, with the challenge being to rotate left and right in order to place them in your sights without being hit by their return fire.



STAR WARS: THE ARCADE GAME 1984

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

Like the Atari coin-op, the Parker home conversions are short but sweet in terms of their challenge. The action starts with a dog fight between Luke Skywalker's X-wing and the Empire's TIE fighters, which blast fireballs at the hero's ship. This works far better than if they were firing lasers like in the movies, as it gives you some target practice and is more visually impressive, even on the lowly Atari 2600. Next up is a series of laser towers that have to be disarmed with your lasers, and finally there's the famous trench run from the first movie, which on successive runs introduces fireballs and obstacles for you to blast or avoid. Parker's 2600 version adapts the arcade game's vector graphics and multiple stages quite well, although it's far blockier and has less going on on-screen. The firm's ColecoVision, C64, Atari 5200 and Atari 8-bit conversions look and play more like the coin-op than the 2600 port, but they suffer from slowdown at times.

FROGGER II: THREEEDEEP! 1984

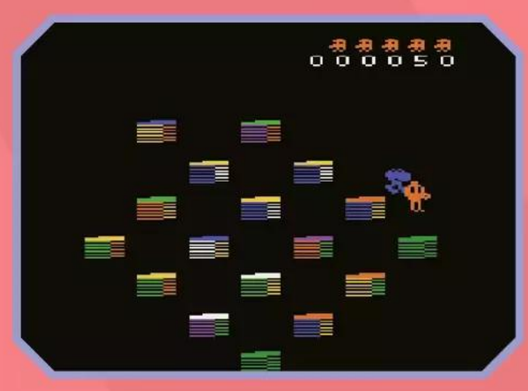
ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

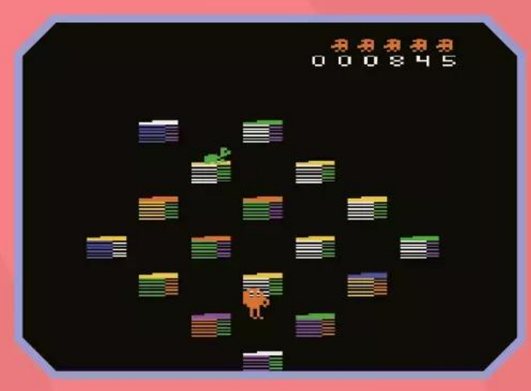
In the first environment of Parker's home exclusive, Frogger swims underwater from the foot of the screen to the top, dodging fish, eels and submarines as he goes. The far shore has bays he has to slot into and there are more on each successive level. The second section has him hopping between rows of floating debris and swimming creatures on his way up the screen towards life preservers. Finally, a third section tasks him with jumping upwards to bays in the clouds using birds and zeppelins for transport. There are edible, helpful and deadly animals to look out for, and an overall goal of filling the bays in each stage's environments in order to advance to more challenging levels.

MONTEZUMA'S REVENGE 1984

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS

A rarity among Parker Brothers videogames, *Montezuma's Revenge* is an original title with absolutely no ties to a licence. It's essentially a platformer, in that there's leaping from surface to surface and shimmying up and down ropes, but far more often you find yourself climbing up and down ladders. For this reason, *Montezuma's* feels a little like *Pitfall!*, and its treasure collecting, creepy crawly opponents and timed challenges reinforce this thought. Parker's title deserves credit for incorporating adventure game elements, such as searching for keys to open doors and navigating pitch dark rooms. The Atari 2600 version has fewer levels than the Atari 8-bit original, but it's still one of the system's best action adventure titles.





Q*BERT'S QUBES 1985

ATARI 2600, COLECOVISION

Released at the beginning of the year that Parker Brothers was sold and renamed, *Q*bert's Qubes* is based on the coin-op of the same name, and is similar to the original *Q*bert*. Besides new villains, the main difference is that hopping on the cubes now spins them 90-degrees instead of colouring their top face. The sides of each cube are different colours, and you have a target cube that you have to spin a row of cubes to match. Once you pull that off then it's on to the next level. Parker only released Atari 2600 and ColecoVision conversions, but both are faithful adaptations and are worthy swan songs for the firm. ✱

LIVELY LICENCES

TOP PARKER BROTHERS GAMES BASED ON TOYS AND MOVIES

In the US during the Eighties, GI Joe and Strawberry Shortcake were incredibly popular toys, and *James Bond* movies were almost as popular as *Star Wars*. With this in mind, it's hardly surprising that Parker Brothers secured the rights to make licensed videogames based on all three properties. *GI Joe: Cobra Strike* (left image) is a single-screen shooter with twin objectives. Firstly, you have to protect military trainees from a giant laser-spitting snake using a movable shield, and secondly you have to target the snake with a cannon, or with two cannons in the two-player mode. *Strawberry Shortcake: Musical Match-Ups* is a puzzle game, where you have to unscramble Strawberry Shortcake characters against the clock using knowledge of the toys or going by their colour-coordinated looks. Lastly, *James Bond 007* (right image) is a side-scrolling action title where you shoot diamonds to collect them, avoid laser satellites and robot divers, and leap over oil rigs in boats – to name but a few of the game's challenges. As with all Parker videogames, these three have excellent presentation and compelling gameplay.

Hardware Heaven

ESSENTIAL GAME
Night Stalker

The Aquarius wasn't a particularly brilliant computer, but good game design can survive through technical deficiencies surprisingly often. That was the case with *Night Stalker*, one of the more compelling Intellivision games that ended up making its way to the Aquarius. The visuals clearly took a hit, but there's still plenty of fun to be had running around the maze in a desperate attempt to find protection, a gun with limited ammunition. It may be better on Mattel's more famous gaming device, but *Night Stalker* is unquestionably a top pick on the Aquarius.

Aquarius

» **MANUFACTURER:** Mattel Electronics » **YEAR:** 1983
» **COST:** £89.95 (launch), £130+ (today, boxed), £70+ (today, unboxed)

With the home-computer market booming in the early Eighties, everyone wanted a slice of the pie – even Mattel Electronics, despite its disastrous attempt to expand the Intellivision into a fully fledged computer with the Keyboard Component. Mattel once again turned hardware design over to Radofin, the Hong Kong-based firm behind the Intellivision hardware, and what it got was the Aquarius. Its black-and-white plastic housing and blue rubber keys are decidedly Eighties, as was its modular approach – the Mini Expander was needed just to add game controllers.

The Aquarius was very cheap relative to other computers on the market, undercutting even the 16K version of the ZX Spectrum by £10. However, it quickly became apparent that the low cost came with major compromises, as the Aquarius had only a quarter of the memory and considerably weaker graphical capabilities. Of course 1983 was not a good year to launch any computer, never mind an underpowered one, due to the price wars instigated by Commodore, and Mattel pulled the plug on the Aquarius just four months after its June 1983 launch. ✱

Aquarius fact

■ Mattel Electronics staff recognised and resented the weakness of the Aquarius, with game designer Bob Del Principe quoted as suggesting "Aquarius – System for the Seventies" as a marketing slogan.

PROCESSOR: 8-BIT ZILOG Z80 CPU (3.5 MHZ),

MEMORY: 4KB RAM (EXPANDABLE TO 36KB), 8KB ROM

GRAPHICS: 80X72 BLOCK GRAPHICS, 16 COLORS

AUDIO: SINGLE CHANNEL INTERNAL BEEPER

STORAGE: ROM CARTRIDGE, CASSETTE TAPE (OPTIONAL)

NETWORKING: 300 BAUD MODEM CARTRIDGE (OPTIONAL)

SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

ULTIMATE GUIDE

TARGET: RENEGADE

THE CITY STREETS ARE NEVER SAFE FOR LONG, ESPECIALLY IN THE DELIGHTFUL-SOUNDING SCUMVILLE, WHERE IT'S KILL OR BE KILLED. JOIN US AS WE REVEAL HOW WITH TARGET: RENEGADE, OCEAN SOFTWARE RETOLD THE STORY OF A VENGEFUL VIGILANTE AND CREATED ONE OF THE BEST EVER 8-BIT BRAWLERS

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

Flashback to 1987. The year's software sales charts are dominated by coin-op conversions – *Out Run* from US Gold, *Combat School* from Ocean, *Enduro Racer* from Activision and *Paperboy* from Elite, to name just four. The outlook for 1988 looks to be no different, with publishers vying to sign up the hottest coin-ops, attracted by the ready-made audiences that are happy to see the games on their systems in some form or other. Expectations are now simmering for the home versions of Technos' *Double Dragon*, one of the highest-grossing coin-ops of 1987. Which publisher will bag the rights? The smart money's on Ocean, as it has =already scored a hit with its conversion of *Renegade*, the arcade forerunner to *Double Dragon*. But maybe US Gold or Firebird will muscle in?

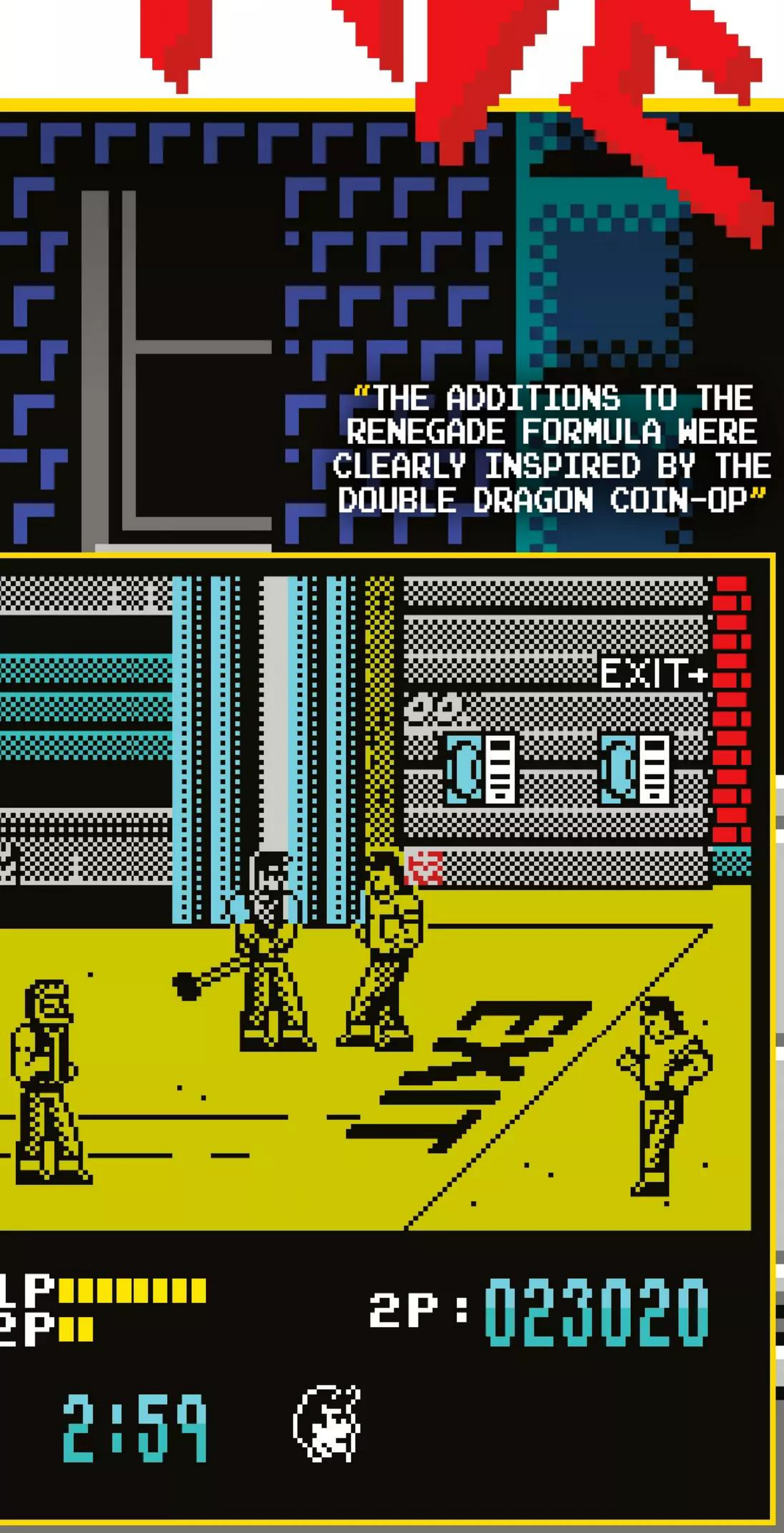
The eventual winner turned out to be… Mastertronic. That's right – the budget kings bamboozled the competition by doing a deal directly with Technos, leveraging its existing relationship with Tradewest, one of Technos' distributors. Mastertronic announced plans to publish the game as a full-price title on its recently acquired Melbourne House label. As you might imagine, Ocean was disappointed. In fact, according to former Ocean artist Mark R Jones, as memorably related in **RG** 213, Ocean was "pissed". There was a silver lining however. When licensing *Renegade*, Ocean had the foresight to have it written into the contract that it could produce its own sequels for the home market. And so with *Double Dragon* missed but not out of mind, the firm began planning *Renegade II* for release on Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64.

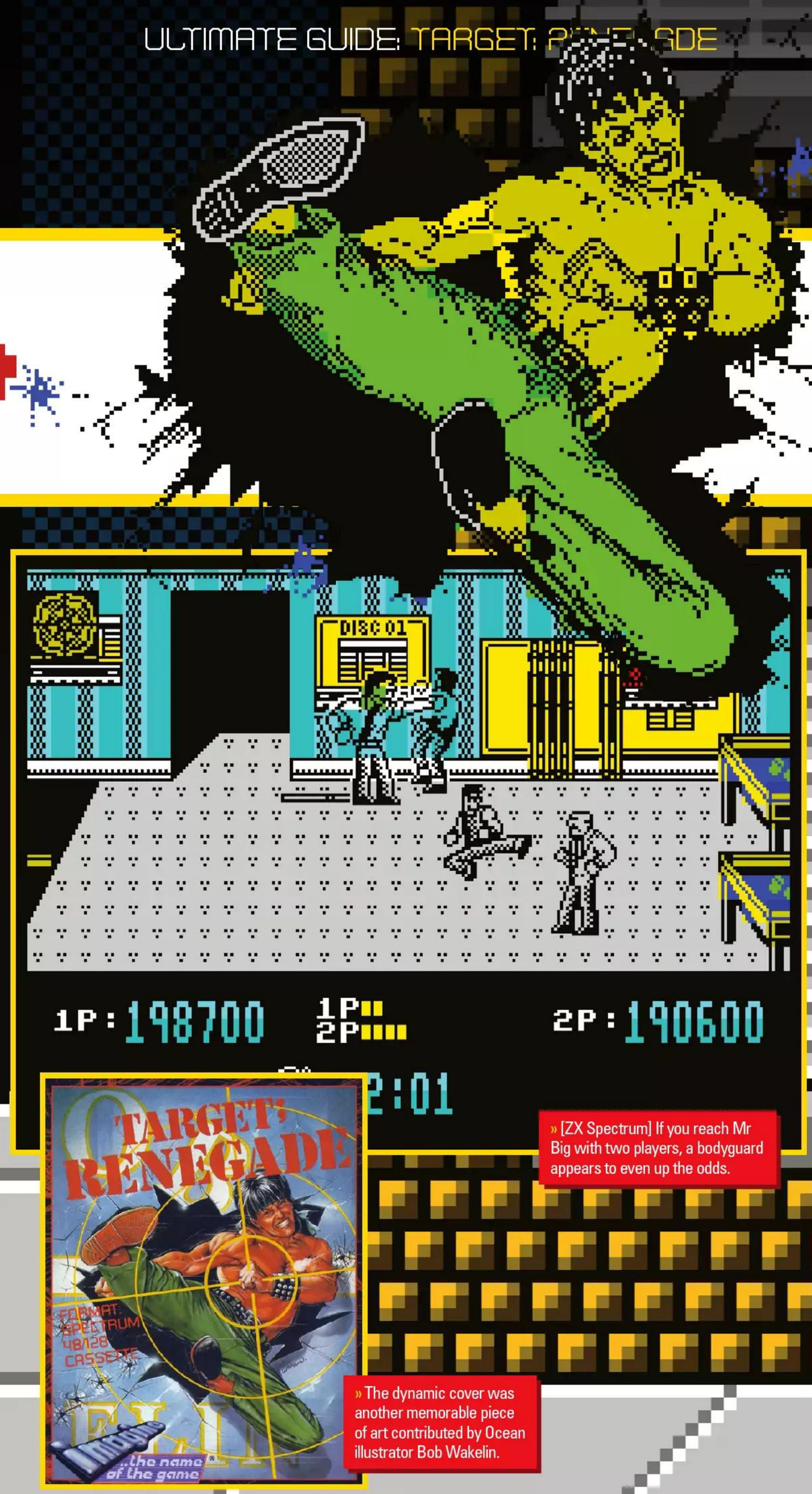
The original *Renegade* conversions had been handled by various teams at Ocean. Mike Lamb had programmed the hit Spectrum version and he spearheaded development of the sequel. Working with the game's graphics artists – Dawn Drake (Spectrum and CPC) and Martin McDonald (C64) – the trio threw around ideas involving people getting thrown around. As you might have guessed, the additions to the *Renegade* formula were clearly inspired by the *Double Dragon* coin-op, which was playable inside Ocean's Manchester HQ. The most obvious new feature was co-op play. This time around, our hero was joined by his brother, with the pair taking to the streets of Scumville to avenge the death of their other sibling Matt at the hands of gangland boss Mr Big. This is where the eventual title *Target: Renegade* came from, as the brothers' planned vengeance had made them marked men.

» [ZX Spectrum] Fight! In co-op mode, more manpower meant more enemies to dispatch.

RENEGADE

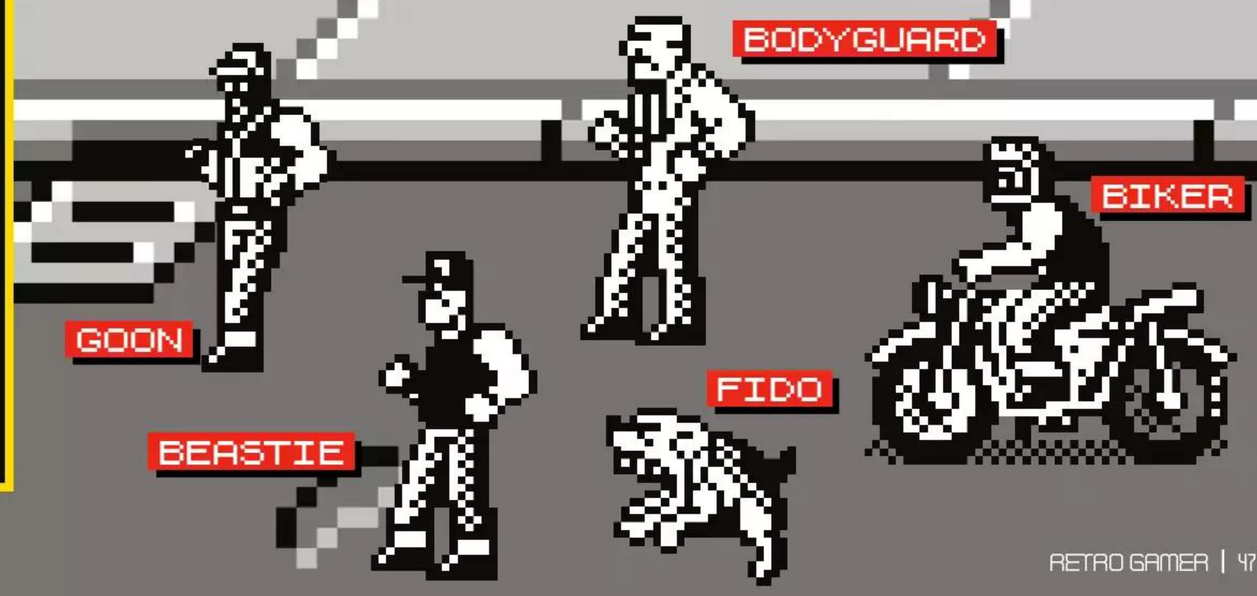
"THE ADDITIONS TO THE RENEGADE FORMULA WERE CLEARLY INSPIRED BY THE DOUBLE DRAGON COIN-OP"





» [ZX Spectrum] If you reach Mr Big with two players, a bodyguard appears to even up the odds.

» The dynamic cover was another memorable piece of art contributed by Ocean illustrator Bob Wakelin.



CONVERSION CAPERS

IT'S A FOUR-WAY FIGHT FOR THE BEST VERSION

ZX SPECTRUM

■ The lead version is not just the best brawler on the Speccy, but probably the finest co-op game too. It builds on the brilliant original to deliver a thrilling arcade experience. The gameplay, graphics and sound (on the 128K) are all excellent, making this our preferred version.

AMSTRAD CPC

■ The CPC version was ported by Mike Lamb himself and it's very good indeed. The game uses four-colour graphics, which means it looks a little unrefined at times – particularly the backgrounds – but this helps keep the action coming thick and fast. This is first-rate brawling.

C64

■ Developed in tandem with the Speccy version, but seemingly not in conjunction, this is quite a different game. Sprite limitations mean it's single-player only, and the streets are rather bereft of baddies. It looks wonderful and sounds even better, but the gameplay is off (technical term).

NES

■ With Ste Ruddy on coding duties and Tim Follin providing the music, this was never going to be terrible, but it's miles off the ace NES version of *Double Dragon II*. There's no co-op play for a start, and technically it's quite rough. One bonus: there's lots of knowing humour throughout.

COMPOSER Q&A

GARI BIASILLO WROTE THE MUSIC FOR THE HOME-COMPUTER VERSIONS

How did you land a job at Ocean Software, producing audio for games like *Target: Renegade*?
At the time I was working at my first job at Interceptor Micros, having made the music for the Amiga and Atari ST versions of *Into The Eagle's Nest*, and *Joe Blade* for the Commodore 64, Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. I was approached by David Blake, an old school friend, who had recently joined Ocean after Software Projects collapsed. So one day I tagged along with David to Ocean unannounced, with a demo disk in hand. Gary Bracey and Martin Galway reviewed it, and I got the job. Simple as that!

Were there any composers at Ocean or elsewhere that you were inspired by?
There are many composers that inspired me, but Rob Hubbard, Tim Follin and Martin Galway were my favourites. Each had a different style that resonated with me.

Your soundtrack is very sombre for an action game. Was this a conscious decision, based on the game's plot?
Yes, very conscious. I purposely avoided a bouncy upbeat set of themes, which I felt were becoming a little too prevalent at that time. Sombre, melancholy and a glimmer of hope were in the back of my mind when composing the music.

"SOMBRE, MELANCHOLY AND A GLIMMER OF HOPE WERE IN THE BACK OF MY MIND..."

Did anyone at Ocean question why the soundtrack wasn't more typical of the genre?
No. I was given free rein to come up with whatever I saw fit.

Which did you prefer to work with – the SID or AY chip?
Without a doubt the SID chip, with its fabulous filter and waveforms. You could do so much more with it sonically than you could with the AY chip. A few years ago I wrote NextDAW, a Digital Audio Workstation for the Spectrum Next, which has three AY chips.

Many people seem to love your *Target: Renegade* soundtrack. For you personally, where does it rate in your work?
It surprises me that it's still popular, and I do receive messages from people about it to this day. Musically, during that era, I rank *Target: Renegade* as being my finest accomplishment.

» [ZX Spectrum] Animal lovers look away. The doggy is about to bite its last ankle.

» [Amstrad CPC] The guy with the gun cares little if any of his ladies accidentally take a bullet.

» [Amstrad CPC] 'Punks in the Park' is *not* the name of a subculture music festival.

"NOW YOU COULD GRAB A SLEDGEHAMMER OR A POOL CUE AND SMASH SOME OPPONENTS..."

Weapons were also added to the mix. Now you could grab a sledgehammer or a pool cue and smash in the heads of opponents. Very satisfying. Also lifted from *Double Dragon* was the trademark flying kick, an upgrade to the vertical jump kick that allowed you to fell multiple foes in one lethal move. Finally, the stages were extended. In *Renegade*, each stage was like a mini battle arena which you could roam around, back and forth. Now the stages were much longer, sprawling out towards Mr Big's hideout on the other side of the city. On the Spectrum and CPC versions this meant that stages had to be loaded in during play on standard memory machines, but because the stages were now longer with many more enemies to floor, the loading wasn't too obtrusive (on 128K machines, the stages all loaded in one go). The C64 version, which was programmed by Dave Collier, featured two in-game loads – one during the game, and another to load in the end sequence, where having defeated Mr Big, our hero seemingly forgets all about his deceased brother and celebrates by smooching with his girl. Sadly, the C64 version lacked the celebrated two-player co-op feature, presumably due to sprite limitations.

One element the C64 version did share with the Spectrum 128K and CPC versions was Gari Biasillo's superb soundtrack. Taking its cue from the cold-blooded premise, the music was solemn from the outset, adding hugely to the game's atmosphere. This atypical theme is now widely recognised as a classic 8-bit soundtrack, yet it was largely overlooked when Ocean released the game on its Imagine label in summer 1988. Looking at the reviews of the time, *The Games Machine* said the music was "fair" and *Zzap!64* called it "above average".

Instead, most reviewers perhaps understandably gushed over the graphics, particularly on the C64 version. "The graphics are the best of this type that I've seen on the 64," commented *CVG*. "[They're] crisply portrayed and beautifully animated." *Zzap!64* called them "cartoon quality". Overall the game received a bunch of magazine honours, including a *Crash* Smash, *Your Sinclair* Megagame, *Amstrad Action* Mastergame and *Commodore User* Screen Star. *The Games Machine* was the only magazine that compared versions, facing off the Spectrum and C64 releases. "The Spectrum wins out," was its conclusion. "*Target: Renegade* is a disappointing sequel for Commodore owners. The game's playability really ruins the sequel:

» [Spectrum Next] The updated version benefits from a lick of paint, adding more colour to the sprites and backgrounds.

TARGET: RENEGADE – WHAT NEXT?

THE HIT BRAWLER IS HEADING TO THE SPECTRUM'S SUCCESSOR

The brothers will be greasing back their hair and wrapping up their hands once more as *Target: Renegade* heads to the Spectrum Next. The updated version is being developed by WASP (We Are Spectrum Programmers), with Next luminary Phoebus Dokos overseeing the project.

Phoebus tells us, "The game is being programmed by master retro programmer Marco Varesio on behalf of WASP, which was founded by the late Lyndon J Sharp. Graphics are being reimagined by Kayashii Furio, and the music will directly draw inspiration from the original version. The whole project is supported by SpecNext Ltd and Henrique Olifiers, who also procured the rights to the franchise." This means the game can enjoy an official release when it's ready. And when will it be ready? "The first level is complete and the team is working on the next levels simultaneously," says Phoebus. So can we expect it this year? "We're hoping so."

As you can see, the new version uses the Spectrum original as its basis, only now the graphics have been refreshed and are far more colourful (though still a little grimy, as you'd hope). Performance has been upped too, so movement is fast and consistent, even when the screen is full of scoundrels, and the screen now scrolls rather than flips. The preview we've played looks highly promising, so our breath is truly bated for the final release.

»[C64] The hero's eyes respond to the on-screen action. It's painfully clear to see what's happened here.

» [C64] Mr Big was modelled on Ocean boss Jon Woods. Apparently the developers did this because they rarely saw him and were "scared of him".

» [NES] Like the original *Renegade* (and *Double Dragon*), the NES version serves up a boss at the end of each stage.

MEAN STREETS

STAGE 1: CAR PARK

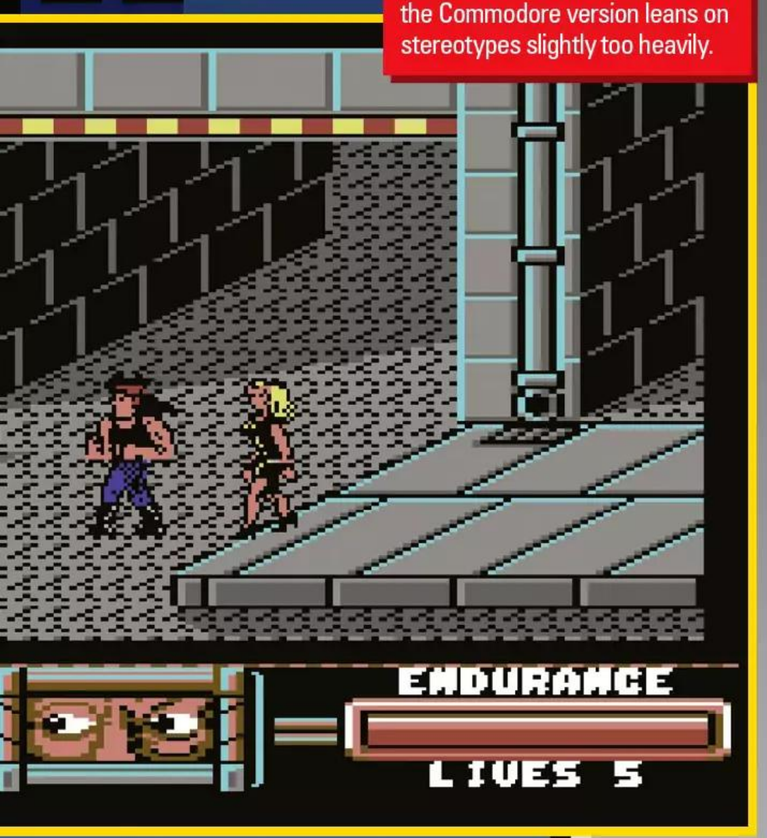
Your trail of vengeance begins on the third floor of a multi-story car park, surrounded by the local biker boys. Start by kicking the bikers off their rides and then proceed down to the ground floor. These low-level enemies pose few problems, especially when you're swinging a hammer.

STAGE 2: SEEDY STREET

It's night time and you're surrounded by lovely ladies. Worse, their 'boss' is afoot and he's packing heat. Thankfully he's a terrible shot, and by positioning yourself behind the women, he'll likely hit them instead. Defeat him when he's out of ammo, and then hotfoot it to the phone.

STAGE 3: THE PARK

This leafy area is no place for a picnic. Punks have taken over and they provide your toughest challenge yet, mainly due to their numbers. Keep moving to avoid getting surrounded, and when in trouble, spam those flying kicks. Finish off foes on the ground if time is tight.



» [C64] In the seedy street scene, the Commodore version leans on stereotypes slightly too heavily.

it is repetitive and overly precise. The Spectrum combat, while tough, doesn't require the irritating accuracy of the Commodore version. Another huge advantage is the two-player mode." Co-op play also elevated the CPC version, and it's quite amusing to read *Amstrad Action*'s response to this 'novelty' new feature in brawlers. "It's strange to see just how compelling the two-player option can be. Working as a team is much more rewarding than solo play." Indeed.

Mastertronic's *Double Dragon* conversion wouldn't arrive until the end of the year, so *Target: Renegade* filled the void and topped the full-price sales charts on all three formats. The magazines mentioned that an Atari ST version was also in the works, but it never arrived. Ocean would revisit the game a couple of years later, teaming up with Taito to release a dedicated version for the NES. The conversions of the first two *Double Dragon* coin-ops had been big sellers on the Nintendo console, so Ocean spotted another opportunity and commissioned Software Creations to convert the game.

The NES version copied *Double Dragon* even more so than its home-computer counterparts. Chiefly, the main character was a mirror image of Billy Lee from the *Double Dragon* games. Elsewhere, evidence of Nintendo's influence could be seen – the graphics were far more cartoony and the plot had been changed so that the hero's brother had been kidnapped rather than killed. And we say 'hero', singular, as there was sadly no co-op option. The game was only released in the US in 1990 where it received a lukewarm reception. *Electronic Gaming Monthly* awarded it 4.5/10 and called it "nothing special".

Prior to the release of the NES version, Ocean released another sequel for home computers – *Renegade III: The Final Chapter* (which is often referred to as 'The Final Insult' by fans of the series, summing up the game perfectly). That misfire was comparable with Mastertronic's *Double Dragon* conversion, which was eventually released at the end of 1988 and was a huge mess on the systems where *Target: Renegade* was already playing. The *Double Dragon* packaging boasted that it was "The only authorised version", yet *Target: Renegade* was everything the home versions of *Double Dragon* should have been. And commercially, Ocean's bean counters would have the last laugh, as the official Christmas 1988 sales charts showed that *Double Dragon* landed in third place – behind two other Ocean licences, *RoboCop* and *Operation Wolf*. ✱

You've got the strength. You've got the moves. You are the weapon!
The bone-crushing sequel to the original smash arcade hit, Renegade.
TARGET: RENEGADE
TAITO

» "You are the weapon!" Taito produced a typically in-your-face ad for the American market.

» [NES] Mr Big's name is somewhat deceiving. Just one of the many visual gags included in the console version.

THINGS TO SEE AND DO IN SCUMVILLE

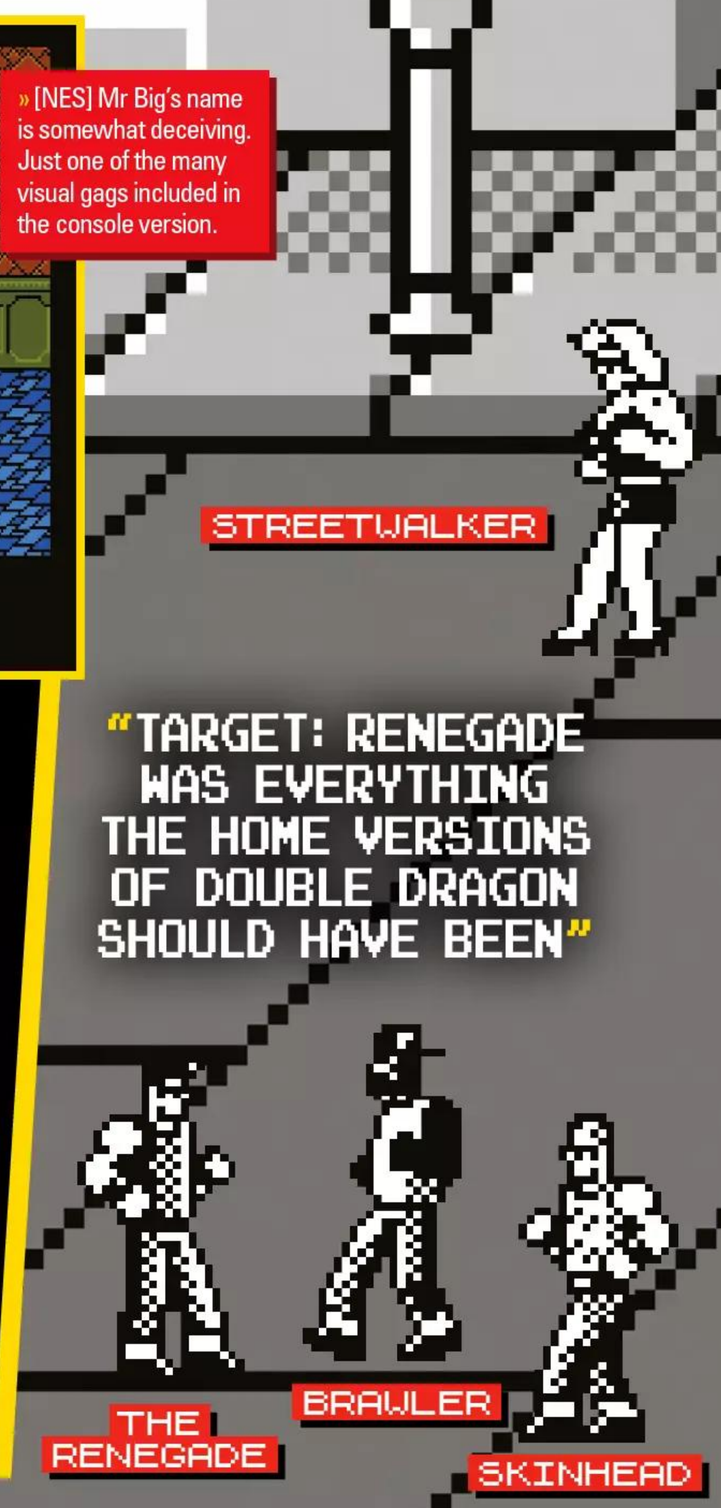
STAGE 4: SHOPPING MALL

■ Fans of the Beastie Boys are hanging out here and they gotta fight for the right to pinch VW badges. The challenge steps up here, as some enemies will duck your flying kicks (when this happens, land and hit them with a back kick). Watch out for their snappy attack dogs too!

STAGE 5: THE BAR

■ Before you can face Mr Big you must deal with his goons. These guys are lethal and they'll headbutt you like a woodpecker, so use the handy pool cue to subdue them. The cue is also the best way to beat Mr Big – although the timing of your swings needs to be spot on.

"TARGET: RENEGADE WAS EVERYTHING THE HOME VERSIONS OF DOUBLE DRAGON SHOULD HAVE BEEN"



Factory Panic

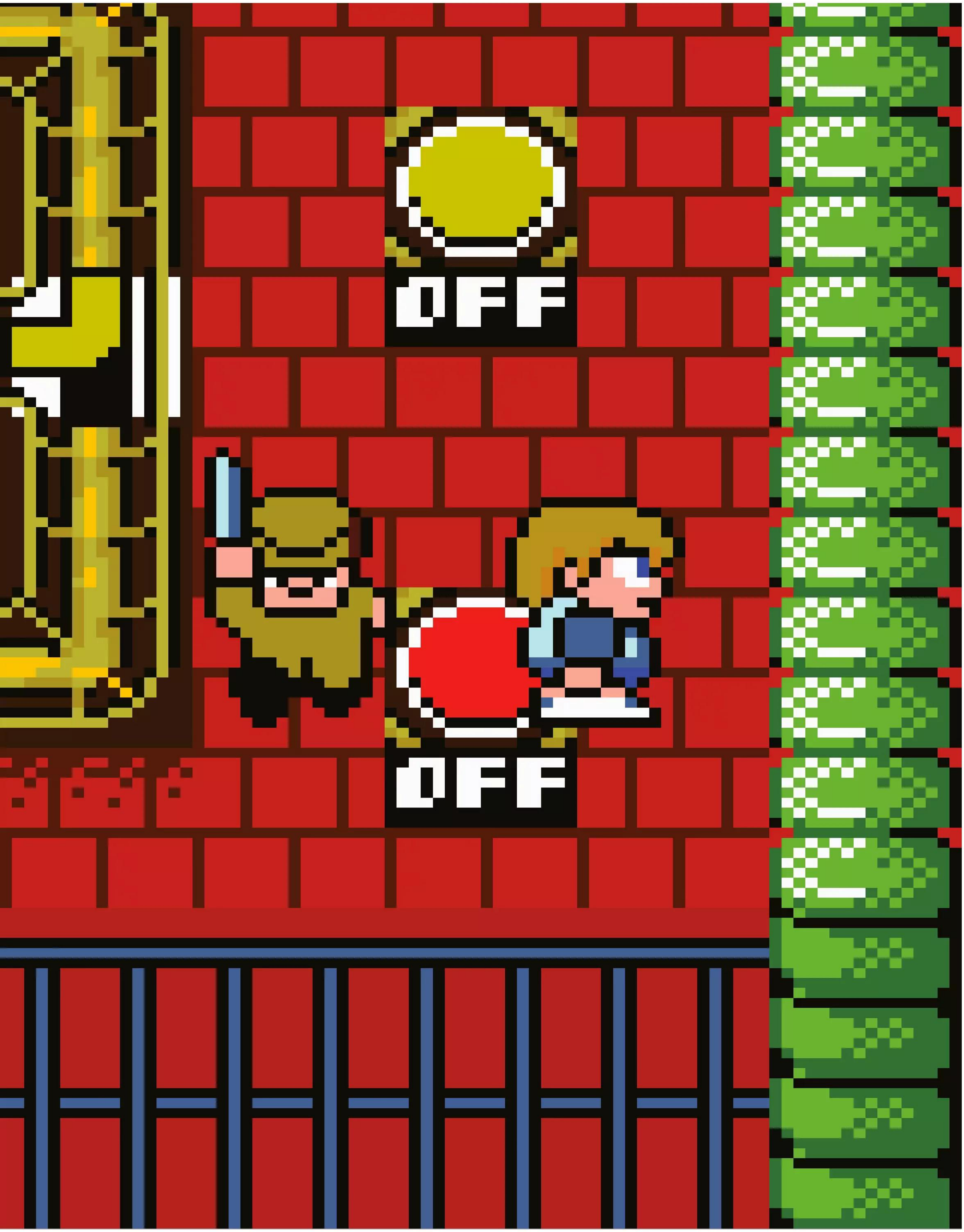
PERESTROIKA, PLAYED DOWN

» GAME GEAR » 1991 » JAPAN SYSTEM HOUSE

There are many reasons that I count myself as fortunate to be working on Retro Gamer, but one of the big ones is that everybody is pushing in the same direction. Many years ago, in a different job, I often felt like the only person in the building trying to do anything useful – a feeling that comes rushing back when I play *Factory Panic*. Outside the factory, a queue of needy people await, wanting all of life's necessities – bread, medicine, Game Gears. Inside, you play as a boy rushing around and single-handedly directing those goods to customers via systems of conveyor belts, while being harassed by guards.

The story about Mr Greede buying up all the factories in Segaville to deny citizens these vital goods doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Then again, the game's original Japanese version didn't make a lot of sense either – over there it was known as *Ganbare Gorby!* and starred then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev instead of the boy, so we can only guess at why the guards might try to stop him. You actually don't have to look too hard to see remnants of the original theme, either.

Odd premise aside, *Factory Panic* is actually a fine little puzzle game. Half of its 32 stages require you to manipulate the flow of goods along the conveyor belts using coloured switches, while the other half have you picking up portable bridges and relocating them between different sections of the conveyor belts. Things can get pretty hectic, especially once the guards start showing up with guns. It's the kind of game the Game Gear really needed more of – it's not a hand-me-down from the Master System or Mega Drive, and it's perfectly suited for portable play. Despite being one of the more enjoyable exclusives on the system, loose carts are pretty affordable so it's well worth adding to your collection if you get the chance. ✱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THE MAKING OF Ambermoon

WITH A VAST WORLD TO EXPLORE AND MYRIAD WAYS TO APPROACH YOUR ADVENTURE, AMBERMOON TOOK FANTASY ROLE-PLAYING TO ANOTHER LEVEL ON THE AMIGA. WE CAUGHT UP WITH KEY FIGURES BEHIND THE GAME TO LEARN ABOUT THE CREATIVE AND TECHNICAL WIZARDRY THAT SHAPED AN RPG CLASSIC

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** THALION SOFTWARE
- **DEVELOPER:** THALION SOFTWARE
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA
- **RELEASED:** 1993
- **GENRE:** RPG

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

CHAMBERS OF SHAOLIN
PLATFORM: AMIGA, C64, ATARI ST
RELEASED: 1989

NO SECOND PRIZE
PLATFORM: AMIGA, ATARI ST
RELEASED: 1992

LIONHEART (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: AMIGA
RELEASED: 1993

Few people who played through *Ambermoon* on its release three decades ago seem to have forgotten the feeling of awe it gave them. The reputation of the game has snowballed in recent years, with copies changing hands for high prices and an unofficial expansion pack recently making waves online. Widely considered to be one of the most satisfyingly rich fantasy role-playing adventures on the Amiga, *Ambermoon* was created by Thalion Software, a German studio known for the likes of *Lionheart* and *No Second Prize*; games that drew on the demo-scene roots of the staff to push Amiga hardware to impressive technical heights. We caught up on a group call with Erik Simon, Karsten Köper and Jurie Horneman – who now live in Malta, Germany and Canada respectively – to look back at how they weaved the same magic with *Ambermoon*.

The team began work on the game after finishing its predecessor *Amberstar*. The two titles were released just one calendar year apart, which seems impressively quick. How did they manage to make such an ambitious creative and technical leap so rapidly? "People were faster those days," laughs Jurie, who was the lead programmer of the game and responsible for its user interface. "I think *Amberstar* took fourteen months and *Ambermoon* took about two years, so it did take slightly longer." The team recall working long hours together in the Thalion office in Gütersloh, but they say it never felt like what would these days be labelled crunch. "For most of us, it probably was crunch, but it did not feel like crunch," reflects Karsten, who was the main game designer. "I didn't have a problem to work 12 to 15 hours a day as long as I had fun with it," he adds. Erik agrees, looking back on his role producing and helping to design the game. He mentions that the speed was partly due to having the underlying technical system ready. "The tech was mostly already there," Erik says. "We had Karsten's editor system so a lot of tangible progress was made all the time."

> "I THINK IT WAS QUITE PIONEERING WORK AND WE DIDN'T REALISE IT"
> ERIK SIMON

That editor system provided Jurie with an underlying "gamemaker" as he describes it, which he could then use to put the puzzle pieces of data into place. Karsten was a dab hand at providing this core structural support system for the game. "I had already created some editors before I met with Erik and joined Thalion," Karsten remembers. "I made editor after editor. We had 2D maps, 3D maps, monster groups attacking, an editor for putting treasure chests together, things like that." Jurie and Erik both mention that this approach was

» [Amiga] Investing in a horse can speed up outdoor exploration, which here leads us to an alchemist's tower.

» [Amiga] As creepy music plays, turning around to discover this guy gives us a jump scare.

Karsten Köper

■ Karsten was lead game designer for *Ambermoon* and *Amberstar*, building editors and writing the stories.

Jurie Horneman

■ Jurie was lead programmer for *Ambermoon*. He's worked for Blue Byte, Rockstar Games, Arkane Studios and more.

Erik Simon

■ Erik produced and designed *Ambermoon*. The Thalion cofounder has led development at studios including 4A Games.

» [Amiga] Our party slashes at skeletons while their necromancer boss lurks in the distance.

» [Amiga] A gradient sky signals dusk as part of the game's night and day cycle.

» [Amiga] A moon breaks orbit and destroys the largest city on Lyramion in *Ambermoon*'s intro.

essentially an early version of what is now called data-driven game design, whereby the focus is on shaping the flow of data through ready-made systems rather than hard-coding every element of a game. "I think most modern games have this approach now, at least more complex role-playing ones," Erik points out. "I think it was quite pioneering work and we didn't realise it."

As well as bringing editors to the party, Karsten also brought along the narrative for the series. "*Amberstar* was already story-ready before I came to Thalion," he explains. "I had the idea and came with the project. The main game story for *Ambermoon* was also on my mind already." The whole team then chipped in to contribute to the lore of the two games, with Jurie writing a 70-page backstory for the *Amberstar* manual and Erik crafting the story for the Forest Moon segment of *Ambermoon*. The overall tale takes place in the fantasy world of Lyramion which, at the start of *Ambermoon*, is still rebuilding civilisation some years after a glowing red moon has crashed into its surface. Starting out at the bedside of your dying grandfather, you set off to explore on a quest that takes your growing party to the two moons of the planet as you learn of an alien threat that must be vanquished.

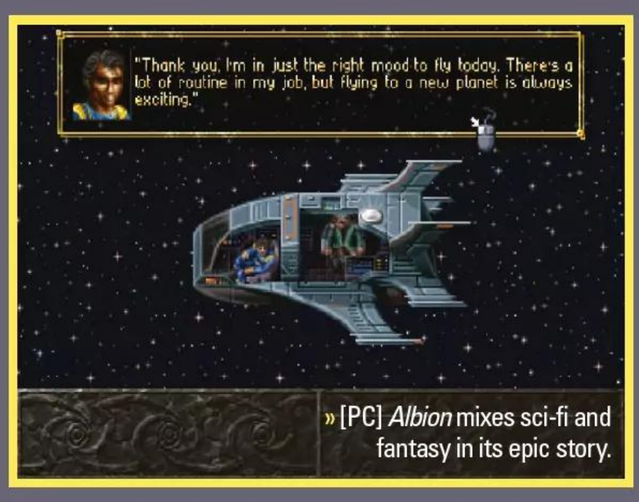
An achievement *Ambermoon* is remembered for is an impressive blend of 2D overhead sections, when your character is roaming wider maps and inside buildings, with full 3D graphics inside towns and dungeon areas. The 3D texture-mapped sections were highly innovative for an Amiga game and have since been

A SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR

HOW ALBION BUILT ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE AMBER SERIES

The PC game *Albion* is closely connected to the *Amber* games. Not only was it made by some of the same team, including Jurie Horneman and Erik Simon after they joined Blue Byte, but it was also built using the same game editor. "It was very much the bones of *Amberstar* and *Ambermoon*, but Erik and I took a different direction for the world and story," Jurie says. "But the editor tech is exactly the same, to the point where we bought hardware ST emulators to put in our DOS PCs to run those editors, because of course those were all written for the Atari ST."

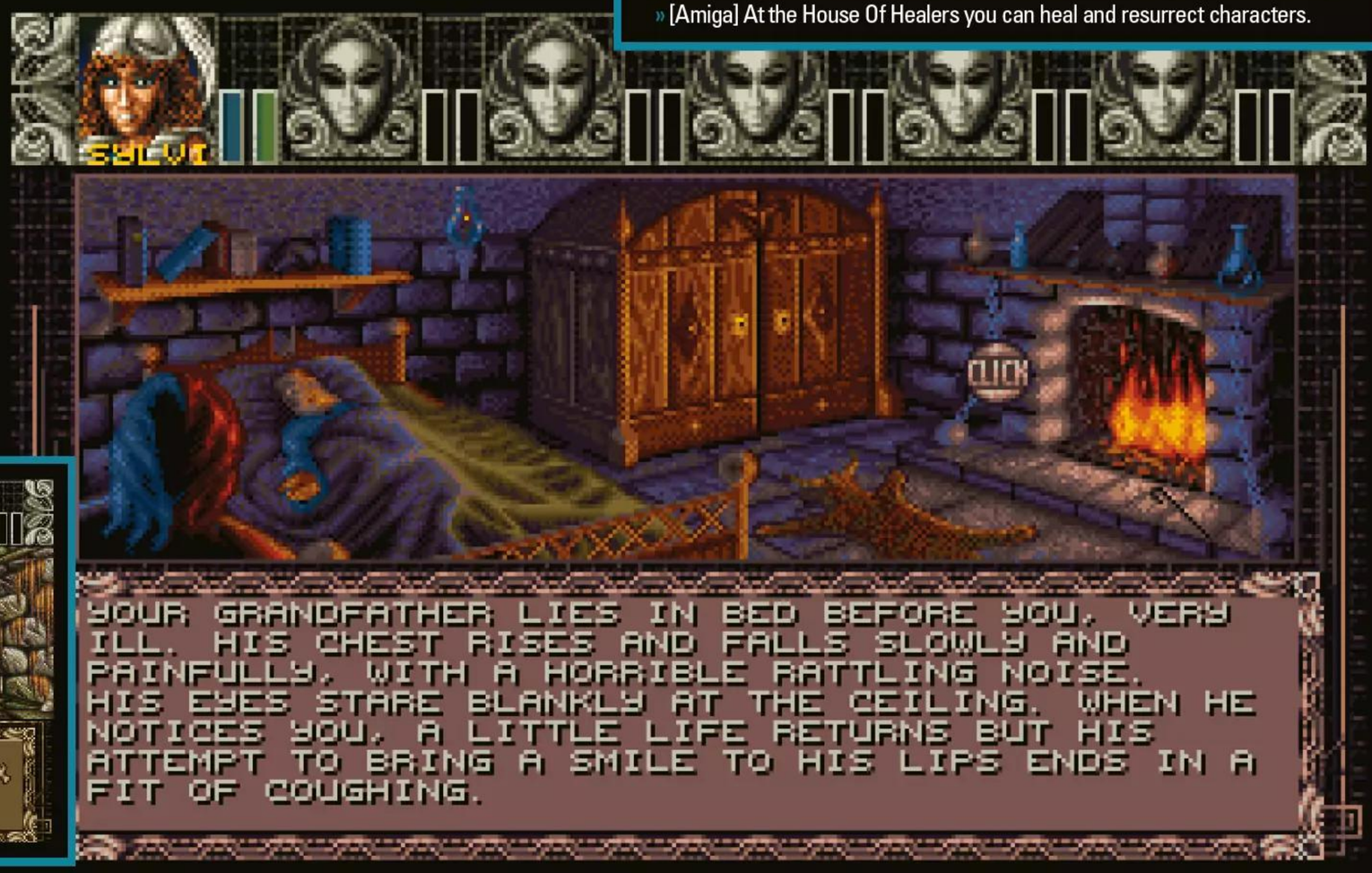
Albion was praised for its intriguing plot. The storyline has some parallels with the later *Avatar* films, which Erik realised when a forum post pointed it out. "I thought, hang on, you've got this planet where there are humans and aliens living in harmony with nature, cat-like and slightly taller aliens with long tails, then there's this industrial complex ship coming to extract raw materials, and they fight against these people," he says with a chuckle. He and Jurie think it's unlikely James Cameron played the game, but they don't mind if he did. "We ripped off *Alien* in our games!" Jurie laughs.


"Thank you, I'm in just the right mood to fly today. There's a lot of routine in my job, but flying to a new planet is always exciting."

» [PC] *Albion* mixes sci-fi and fantasy in its epic story.

» Karsten has the original *Ambermoon* box art painting hanging on his wall.

» [Amiga] At the House Of Healers you can heal and resurrect characters.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YOUR GRANDFATHER LIES IN BED BEFORE YOU. VERY ILL. HIS CHEST RISES AND FALLS SLOWLY AND PAINFULLY, WITH A HORRIBLE RATTLING NOISE. HIS EYES STARE BLANKLY AT THE CEILING. WHEN HE NOTICES YOU, A LITTLE LIFE RETURNS BUT HIS ATTEMPT TO BRING A SMILE TO HIS LIPS ENDS IN A FIT OF COUGHING.

» [Amiga] The story begins at the bedside of your grandfather, who was the hero in *Amberstar*.

» Amiga: Magic gives you a huge advantage in fights, but wizards are also vulnerable to attacks.

RPG INSPIRATION

THE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES THAT INFLUENCED AMBERMOON

ULTIMA

Karsten believes the *Ultima* series has given us "the greatest role-playing games of all time" and Erik tells us Thalion's RPGs are "rooted in *Ultima*". The first instalment of Richard Garriott's adventure series was released in 1981 for the Apple II before launching on other platforms. Players had the freedom to explore an open world viewed from above and dangerous dungeons seen from first-person perspective. This inspired countless other RPGs built in the same mould.

FINAL FANTASY

Karsten played many Japanese RPGs before designing *Ambermoon*, while Erik says early JRPGs are up there "on top of the list" along with *Ultima* as inspirations. One example they mention is the original *Final Fantasy*, a game that has since had 16 sequels plus remakes and spin-offs, becoming one of the best-selling videogame franchises of all time. Jurie points out the team's JRPG interest was not too common among Western developers at the time.

DRAGONFLIGHT

Before the *Amber* series, the first RPG created by Erik and his Thalion cofounder Udo Fischer was *Dragonflight*. Essentially a more basic version of the *Amber* games, it was released in 1991 for DOS, Amiga and Atari ST to a good critical reception. You can access the world of *Dragonflight* through a portal in *Ambermoon*. You can also recruit the hero of the Thalion action platformer classic *Lionheart*, Valdyn. "The Thalion cinematic universe," laughs Jurie.

compared to work id Software was doing around the same time. Players had complete freedom of movement rather than being restricted by the screen-by-screen static views of *Amberstar* and prior dungeon crawlers. Erik pays credit to the work id was doing and admits that the studio took an even smarter approach. "I still wonder if we could have optimised the game a bit more if we would have had the genius idea that Carmack had back then, where *Doom* and *Wolfenstein*, they're basically not 3D games as such," Erik ponders. "I think we actually still calculated the 3D coordinates of the boxes, while *Doom* and *Wolfenstein* have this ray casting algorithm which basically scans a map and just paints vertical lines across the screen and it looks like 3D, but it's not really 3D. We didn't do that, but the sort of simplified real 3D that we did was probably not as clever."

Jurie remembers seeing his fellow programmer, Michael Bittner, working on an early version of this 3D texture-mapping technique when Jurie came to Thalion for a job interview. "I look over my shoulder and I see a texture-mapped cube running on an Atari ST. I was deeply into the Atari ST demoscene at the time and I was very aware of what was possible, and I was like, that's definitely not possible! So in January 1991 some version of that tech existed." This certainly fits with the reputation Thalion had for technical excellence. "We knew each and every byte of our target platforms," Erik laughs. "We could optimise the hell out of stuff."

The attention to detail that went into the development is very apparent as you explore the maps of *Ambermoon*. At the start of the adventure, you'll probably stop off in a town, speak to NPCs and pick up some quests. But you could just as well wander off across the map into an orc ambush, or tip-toe around a bandit hideout trying not to trigger their alarm system. Levelling up as you engage in combat, picking up new members of your party and upgrading your equipment is highly satisfying, as is the turn-based combat. All of this is soundtracked by an evocative score by Matthias Steinwachs that really builds the atmosphere. Given the scope of the game, it's no wonder it came on nine disks, meaning it was much easier to play for those fortunate Amiga gamers in possession of a hard drive.

> "THERE ARE A TON OF TINY EASTER EGGS. THE WHOLE THALION OFFICE IS IN THERE"
> JURIE HORNEMAN

If you're lucky, while playing the game you might stumble across one of the hidden features the team planted into the world. "There are a ton of tiny Easter eggs. The whole Thalion office is in there," Jurie says with a smile, as the team recall their effigies being available to recruit to your party if you can find their workplace through an illusory wall. "Erik is a warrior dwarf," Karsten recalls with a chuckle. "From there you can get all the items in the game." Jurie also remembers a fun psychedelic Easter egg that confused Michael Bittner. "On the Forest Moon, in the wilderness there are lots of monsters that can attack you. The way you get around that is by finding mushrooms. The monsters don't like the smell of the mushrooms, so they don't attack you, so there's a little bit of logic there. And someone was like, 'Mushrooms are edible, we need to make it so you can eat it.'" This led to Jurie implementing a 'stoned' effect if you eat a mushroom, which Michael then earnestly mistook for a bug. "He calls me and says, 'It's weird, the mouse cursor is vibrating and it's drifting towards the top corner, and the colours are changing the whole time.' I was sort of stringing him along," laughs Jurie.

For all that *Ambermoon* was a creative triumph, it came at a time in the history of Thalion Software when the company was on a commercial precipice. "*Ambermoon* and *Lionheart* were our last test balloons in terms of, 'Is the Amiga still viable as a platform?'" remembers Erik. "We were giving it our all and trying to do something that was clearly ahead in quality of the average game. We didn't even put copy-protection on it anymore, because coming from that scene ourselves we knew it would get cracked so fast it wasn't worth it. [We thought] either this sells well enough, or we'll move to the PC – so we moved to the PC."

» [Amiga] Find the merchant in Spannenberg as soon as possible to upgrade your weapons and armour.

PHANTASIE

Phantasie was the work of Strategic Simulations, a prolific developer and publisher founded in 1979 that became known for wargames before moving its focus to fantasy RPGs. The strapline for *Phantasie* promoted "a multiple-character role-playing odyssey", and it did allow players to assume the role of diverse character classes and races, earning praise from reviewers. Like many RPG creators, designer Winston Douglas Wood cited tabletop games such as *RuneQuest* as inspirations.

MYTHOS

This first RPG game designed by a young Karsten was released in Germany on Atari 8-bit computers and the C64. Although clearly inspired by *Ultima*, it included some novel features such as the full-screen illustrations that appear during transitions in the action. The character stats, overworld map, spells and turn-based battles you would expect are all there and designing them gave Karsten a starting point for the editors he created for the *Amber* games.

» [Amiga] Dungeon exploration takes place in texture-mapped 3D, which was impressive on the Amiga.

AMBERMOON ADVANCED

ROBERT SCHNECKENHAUS, AKA PYRDACOR, ON HIS FAN REMAKE AND EXPANSION

So Robert, when did you start playing *Ambermoon*?

I guess I was around 12 so it was probably around 1997. My brother-in-law gifted me his Amiga and with it his whole gaming collection. I explored one game at a time and one of them was *Ambermoon*. I loved it from the start, spent months playing the game, made handwritten notes and had a wonderful time. I guess other fans can relate. The feeling is indescribable. You just get completely involved in a totally different kind of reality. It was like I was really on Lyramion.

What sparked the idea to make an expansion for the game?

My first plans to create a game like *Ambermoon* are at least 20 years old. It is one of the reasons I became a programmer. I was always interested in games and how they work and also in creating my own game systems and engines. As *Ambermoon* was not perfect, I also wanted to add things to it which were missing in my opinion or could improve the gameplay. Actually, I always dreamed of creating the third part of the trilogy. I still do! But as this is a huge project I thought I will start with an expansion first.

How did you start expanding the game?

With the expansion I had two major goals: fixing and improving the existing game and adding new content. In the beginning I gathered all the ideas for changes to improve the game and started to edit existing game data. But this is a rather boring task so I started to create some new NPCs and 2D maps which I integrated into the start city Spannenberg. I wrote some small quest story around this and tried to make it consistent with the game and not too distracting or awkward. I even created my first small 3D dungeon. For 3D maps I always take a chequered notebook and start designing interesting dungeons with some story and theme in mind.

Can you tell us about your future plans for the expansion?

The third episode will extend the Forest Moon but also has some extension to Lyramion and also adds a lot of technical things like new spells, battle effects on curses like blindness or poisoning but also new weapon types and scripted sequences on some maps. Then the fourth episode will extend Morag and the fifth episode should finalise the expansion. I have a lot of ideas for this already.

To find out more and play *Ambermoon Advanced* visit Pyrdacor.net

» [PC] *Ambermoon Advanced* adds new locations, characters, quests and visual polish while preserving the core game.

Thalion duly closed its doors. Erik and Jurie moved on to join Blue Byte, where they would go on to create *Albion*, based on the same editor system as the *Amber* games. As Jurie remembers it, "The English localisation of *Ambermoon* was ready to go, but we weren't working there anymore." While the game launched in German in December 1993, the English-language version was nowhere to be seen. Two years later in 1995, some British magazines gained review access via Thalion UK, which was essentially a completely different company that picked up the rights to sell Thalion games. Despite the press coverage, somehow it seems the English game never officially made it to shop shelves.

From there, the story of the English-language version gets blurry, but super-fan Alex Holland, who runs Thalion Webshrine, helps us untangle what happened next. After starting his impressive website tribute to the company in 1998, Alex got in touch with Thalion members to add information and files to the site. "Erik Simon was working at Blue Byte at the time, so I wrote to his work email address and asked him about the English translation," Alex explains. "He tells me that he has a working copy of *Ambermoon* in English but he can't email the contents because he doesn't have an Amiga and the disks don't read on a PC. So he kindly posts me (possibly the only copy) of *Ambermoon* in English. A few days later they arrive, I dump the contents onto my Amiga 4000, which was connected via ethernet to JANET, the academic internet, and I uploaded the disk images and began sending out links to various websites such as Amiga.org and English Amiga Board. You'd be amazed how quickly people were playing *Ambermoon* in English."

"EVERY MONTH TO HALF A YEAR, I GET AN EMAIL TELLING ME HOW WONDERFUL IT WAS TO PLAY THE GAME"

KARSTEN KÖPER

» [Amiga] Managing your items, gold, rations and character stats can be engrossing.

» [Amiga] Loitering in the graveyard where skeletons, zombies and a necromancer reside.

Alex and other community members quickly found some bugs, which they promptly fixed and patched into an updated version of the game. Alex also helped to shut down a rogue unlicensed version that a small publisher started to illegally sell online. He remains close to the Thalion team and joined them for a reunion in 2006. "I feel like an adopted member of Thalion," he tell us, adding how grateful he is to the studio for the enjoyment he has had from their games over the years.

Gratitude is an emotion the Thalion team also feel for the continued appreciation for *Ambermoon*. "For me, it's a wonder. Every month to half a year, I get an email from a random person, telling me how wonderful it was to play the game, even 30 years later," Karsten says proudly. Erik agrees, adding, "I continue to be amazed. I can hardly believe that people remember the things we did so many decades ago." Jurie reflects that, "Most of the people who remember the game and contact us played it as kids, so these are very rosy memories for them. It's a very wholesome fan community, and that's something that these days is hard to find. It's nice that people remember it, and it's something no one can take away from us."

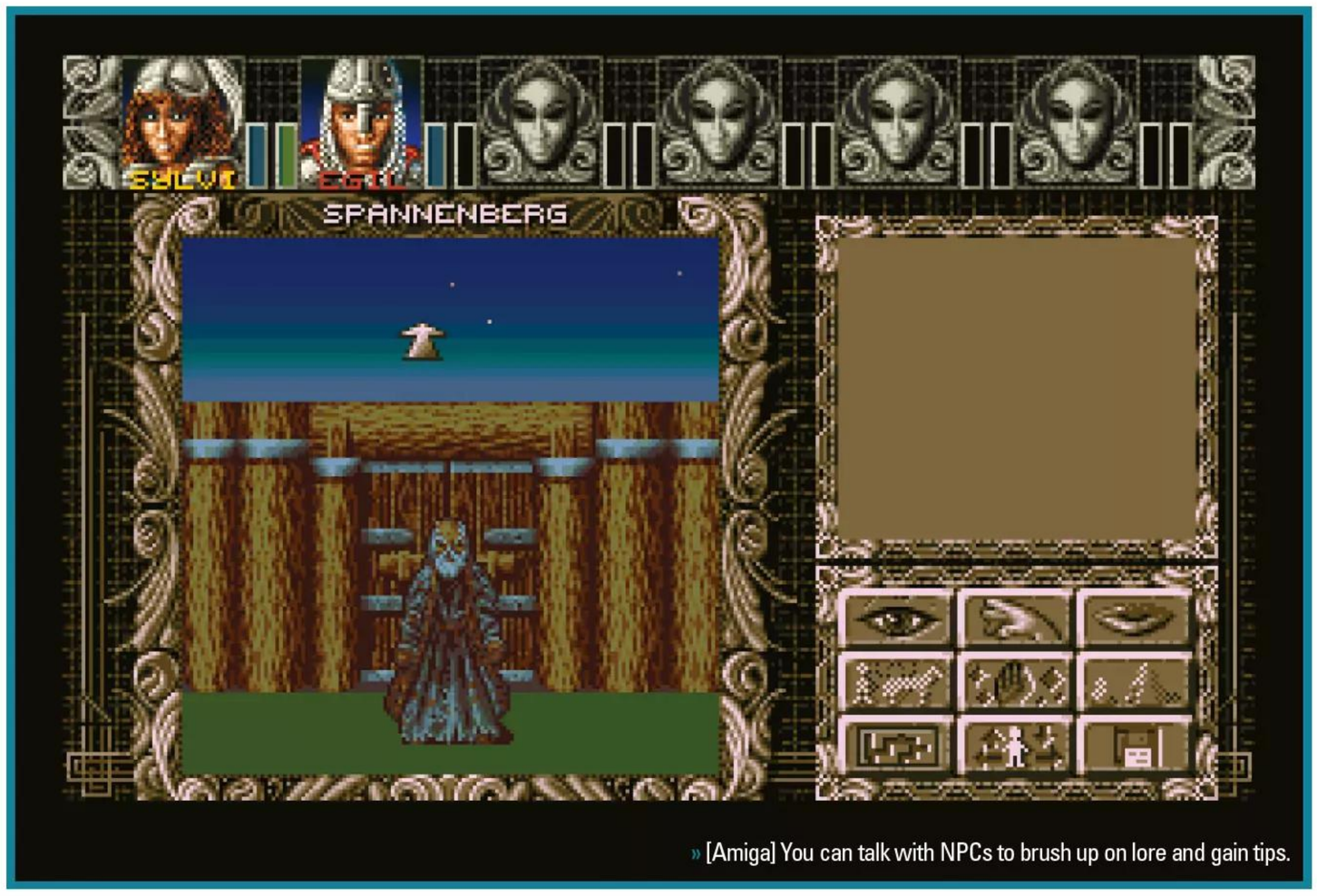
Erik and Jurie have continued working in the games industry. Just last year, Jurie put the source code for *Amberstar* and *Ambermoon* onto GitHub for anyone to access (he's also uploaded the scrapped Amiga version of *Albion*). Karsten left the industry after *Ambermoon*, initially to run a shop selling computer games, before opening a company focussed on cinema installations and telecommunications. He shows us the stunning original paintings for the game's artwork that hang proudly on his walls, and one of several pristine copies of *Amberstar* in his possession. "They go for 500 Euros now and I have around 20 of these!" Karsten says. Erik is impressed with this revelation. "That's part of your retirement plan," he laughs. Although Karsten had originally intended to make the series a trilogy, he's clearly happy with the legacy the two games have left. "I'm lucky that *Ambermoon* is somewhat remembered by so many people. I feel lucky that I have done that," he says with a smile. ✱

» [Amiga] Orcs are a particularly deadly enemy early in the game before you've levelled up.

» [Amiga] Correctly answering a riddle gains us entry to the thieves' guild below an inn.

THALI
DARKNESS EMBRACES THALIONS PAIN-FILLED SENSES BEFORE HE ENTERS BALA'S REALM AS THE LAST MEMBER OF THE PARTY. IS THIS THE END OF ALL ADVENTURES?

» [Amiga] A brutal description awaits when you die. Save your game often.



» [Amiga] You can talk with NPCs to brush up on lore and gain tips.

THE MAKING OF MICKEY MANIA

THERE WERE SEVERAL GAMES ON THE MEGA DRIVE FEATURING THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS MOUSE, SOME VERY GOOD (CASTLE OF ILLUSION), SOME VERY BAD (FANTASIA). AND THEN THERE WAS MICKEY MANIA, AN IMPRESSIVE TECHNICAL SHOWCASE FROM TRAVELLER'S TALES

WORDS BY PAUL KAUTZ

» [Mega Drive] From a technical point of view, the rotation of the 3D tower is extremely clever smoke and mirrors. Still, the results are amazing.

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SONY IMAGESOFT, SEGA
- **DEVELOPER:** TRAVELLER'S TALES
- **RELEASED:** 1994
- **PLATFORM:** MEGA DRIVE, SNES, MEGA-CD, PLAYSTATION
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

» [Mega Drive] The first level starts with film strips and in black and white, then slowly switches to colour. The effect is quite beautiful.

The idea of *Mickey Mania* started with a game called *Mickey's Birthday Party*, which was going to be an epic, story-driven adventure centred around a journey through the key adventures of the famous cartoon mouse. It was the pet project of then 22-year-old David Jaffe of Sony Imagesoft (who would go on to make brilliant games like *Twisted Metal* and *God Of War*). Basically, a simplified version of *Kingdom Hearts* before there was a *Kingdom Hearts*.

Disney liked the idea, and Sony Imagesoft took the concept to the British development team Traveller's Tales, led by Jon Burton and Andy Ingram, who had already proven their ability to create technically impressive platformers in a short span of time, with games such as *Leander* (1991, also known as *The Legend Of Galahad*) and *Puggsy* (1993). They quickly developed several demo levels that impressed Disney executives. However, David's ambitious plans had to be scaled back considerably due to the target platform, as Jon confirms to us, "The original pitch for the game to Disney actually came from Dave Jaffe at Sony Imagesoft, but a lot changed during development. When we first met with Sony to discuss the design, the two designers they had (Dave Jaffe and Mike Giam) had ideas that just weren't possible on the Mega Drive hardware. Being English and sarcastic, I probably shot down their ideas fairly brutally. In any case, one of them left the room in tears. I still feel bad about that!"

> "I WATCHED HOURS AND HOURS OF MICKEY MOUSE CARTOONS FROM THE ARCHIVES AT DISNEY"
> **JON BURTON**

The first public presentation of the freshly renamed *Mickey Mania* took place on 23 June 1994 at the Summer CES in Chicago. Disney CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg himself led the demonstration of the game and used the occasion to officially announce Disney's collaboration with Sony Imagesoft. This announcement was echoed in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* the following day, where executive producer Richard Robinson described *Mickey Mania* as "the ultimate *Mickey Mouse* game", which was finally released worldwide in October 1994. Sega's Mega Drive was the lead development platform, but the game also appeared on other game systems – for more on that, please see the Conversion Capers panel. ▶

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

TOY STORY
RELEASED: 1995
PLATFORM: VARIOUS

SONIC R (PICTURED)
RELEASED: 1997
PLATFORM: VARIOUS

LEGO STAR WARS: THE VIDEO GAME
RELEASED: 2005
PLATFORM: VARIOUS

JON BURTON

» One of the founders of Traveller's Tales, and the programmer and co-designer of *Mickey Mania*. After leaving his company in 2019, he founded 10:10 Games, where he's currently working on *Funko Fusion*.

"WE WORKED WITH A GREAT PRODUCER WHO PRETTY MUCH LET US DO WHAT WE WANTED"
JON BURTON

» [Mega Drive] The Mad Doctor world is full of suicidal skeletons, whose bouncing bones cause a lot of damage.

Mickey Mania was originally scheduled for release in late-1993 to coincide with Mickey Mouse's 65th birthday, but this was not feasible as it would leave Traveller's Tales less than six months for development. So it was decided early on to drop the birthday theme altogether and instead celebrate the mouse's life through some of his most important cartoons: seven (mostly) short films, from the years 1928 through 1990, arranged in chronological order – you can find out more about this selection in the A Rich Legacy panel.

According to Jon, he had over 100 films featuring Mickey Mouse to choose from when deciding which shorts would be used as a source of inspiration. "I watched hours and hours of *Mickey Mouse* cartoons from the archives at Disney and picked the ones that would be different and fun, and represented the major time periods of Mickey's evolution." The result is a game in which no two worlds look the same, and each one is unique in every way. The only thing that always stays unchanged is the Mickey Mouse you play as.

In the end, there are six worlds to explore, each divided into two to six sections. All in all, there are around two dozen levels, the completion of which unfortunately culminates in a rather unsatisfying ending. There is no rewarding outro, just a screen with a maniacally grinning Mickey, the words "Well Done Mickey!" There's also a brief congratulation to the player, a presentation of the game's enemies, and the credits, the end of which states, "If you like this game, buy it twice!" According to Jon, this was not due to time constraints or lack of cartridge space, but rather deliberate, "There wasn't really any story throughout the game, just kind of 'find the other Mickeys', so I guess we felt 'Well done, you did it!' would be just fine."

In terms of content, *Mickey Mania* is mostly standard platforming, following the path of games such as *Castle Of Illusion*. Mickey runs, jumps, throws marbles at enemies and bounces off their heads. Every once in a while he has to move objects such as tables, apples or flowerpots, and there are small puzzles too. Other than that, there are the inevitable standards: disappearing platforms, stairs that unexpectedly turn into slippery slopes, chandeliers that you have to put into motion by running back and forth on them at the right moment – and a lorry ride through a fast auto-scroller level full of saw blades and acid pits. This level seems to be much shorter than all the others, which according to Jon is because all the levels had to be the same width for technical reasons, which also applies to the lorry ride. But because you

CONVERSION CAPERS

HOW MANIAC WAS MICKEY ON OTHER SYSTEMS?

SNES

Alongside the Mega Drive version, *Mickey Mania* was also released on the Super Nintendo. This version is slightly more colourful than the original and has a few graphical improvements. Unfortunately, it also has a much smaller playfield, fewer special effects, fewer levels, less Pluto, less music, shorter credits – and much longer loading times. The version to avoid, if you have the choice.

MEGA-CD

Shortly after the original release, *Mickey Mania* also became available on the Mega Drive's CD expansion. The game stays pretty much the same, but there is one additional enemy, slightly extended boss battles, more voice acting and a much better sounding CD soundtrack. Compared to the original, loading times are also slightly longer, but at least they are shorter than on the SNES.

PLAYSTATION

PlayStation fans had to wait the longest for their *Mickey Mania* version, officially called *Mickey's Wild Adventure*, which was released in the spring of 1996. But it was well worth the wait, as this is by far the best version of the game: more colourful graphics with more detail than ever before, real polygonal worlds in the (now two) 3D chases, many gameplay improvements and a fantastic new soundtrack.

» [Mega Drive] In the first Lonesome Ghosts level, visibility is very limited. Also, the ghosts first became transparent in the later PlayStation version.

drive through it faster and at automatic speed, it is only about 20 seconds long – even though in terms of sheer size it is just as extensive as all the other sections.

So you really shouldn't expect any big surprises regarding the game's content, but you should be prepared for a level of difficulty that can be quite frustrating at times. Although there are three difficulty levels to choose from (the easiest of which only lets you play the first five worlds) and a maximum of five lives, *Mickey Mania* is a destroyer of gamepads, particularly in its final world, largely due to the extremely sensitive collision detection. Jon takes full responsibility for this, "I think I just made the game too hard!", but also revealed that losing a life in *Mickey Mania* was the first time the mouse had ever been depicted as dead in a game. Which, according to Jon, was surprisingly not a problem, "We worked with a great Disney producer who pretty much let us do what we wanted with the game design." He even jokingly considered selling T-shirts that said 'We killed Mickey Mouse!' back then.

A total of 14 enemy types await Mickey's marbles, all themed to match the short films they hail from. There are also five bosses, although only Pete at the very end can be considered a real challenge. The others are a machine that spits out crates and bombs, the Mad Doctor, who can be easily dispatched from a safe distance, and an oversized spider as well as a moose that you can only run away from.

» [Mega Drive] Some levels, such as the first Beanstalk section, are a colourful joy.

***Mickey Mania* may be average on the inside, but on the outside it is one of the most beautiful games ever to grace a 16-bit console.** This is partly due to the fact that, as with 1993's *Aladdin*, the animation for all the characters came directly from the source, "The character animation came from a company that Disney approved called Creative Capers. They supplied us with ink drawings for each frame of animation which we then scanned and coloured in on computer. The backgrounds were copied and elaborated on from the films by our in-house artist Beverly Bush," Jon tells us. "We tried to stay as close as possible to the content of the films. And obviously Disney had strict guidelines regarding the look and feel of the characters." In total, around 1,500 animation frames ended up being used by Traveller's Tales, 350 of which just for Mickey Mouse himself!

As a result, not only are the fluid movements insanely impressive, but so are the game's graphical effects. You can tell that Jon has his roots in the home- ▶

LOST MICKEY

WHAT HAPPENED TO MICKEY MANIA 2?

Shortly after the completion of *Mickey Mania*, Jon Burton began work on the official sequel, which would have continued the original concept of cartoon-based time travel: the first scenario would have been set in the Wild West, based on the 1934 short film *Two-Gun Mickey*, which, like *Steamboat Willie*, would have started out in black and white, only to move seamlessly into the Technicolor era as the level progressed. The gameplay would have been essentially more of the same, but with a higher percentage of puzzles using the now unlimited supply of marbles that had more use than before. There were also additional collectibles, such as hidden MICKEY letters, a deeper 3D background effect, smooth day/night transitions within a level (including fireflies buzzing around lanterns as darkness falls), a new pole-swinging mechanic – and, of course, a 3D escape out of the screen, only this time away from a herd of stampeding cattle.

The game would have even featured a first-person shooter-style level (without the gory shooting, of course), for which Jon had already developed the necessary technology on the then already rather dated Mega Drive hardware. However, development of *Mickey Mania 2* was put on hold in favour of the official game for the forthcoming CGI film *Toy Story*, which then used all the new effects and even a level featuring first-person gameplay. The decision to switch lanes was the right one; *Toy Story* went on to become a hugely successful million-seller. But it's still a shame that *The Timeless Adventures Of Mickey Mouse* found an end before their time.

» [Mega Drive] Many thanks to Jon for sharing these early prototype images with us.

> "I STILL REALLY LIKE THE GAME, IT'S IN THE TOP FIVE OF THE ONES I'VE MADE"
> **JON BURTON**

» [Mega Drive] It may look quite jolly but this spider's touch is immediately deathly – you can only run away from it, with the help of a speeding beetle.

» [Mega Drive] If you look hard enough, you'll find the bonus level, which ends with the bandleader Mickey spinning around happily in a tornado.

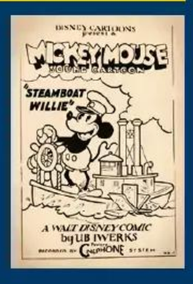
▶ computer demoscene – hotly crackling fire, realistic particle and physics effects such as bouncing skeleton bones, ropes gently swinging from the ceiling or fully animated, real-time calculated clocks with rotating hands and dangling pendulums all feature. There are also cool perspective treats with rotations and scaling effects that were rarely seen on the Mega Drive. The reason for that is, that these are all optical tricks, like the cranes in the first world that seem to rotate through the picture and even have a hollow interior. Or the house entrance in the first ghost level, which you seem to walk through in three dimensions. Seem is right, as these are all just perspective tricks with pre-made and skillfully played-back animations. Or, in the case of the house entrance, vertical stripes of sprites that more and more overlap as you approach, rather than real polygonal or even texture-based calculations for which the Mega Drive's CPU was far too slow. But they look good enough to fool the unknowing eye and give the impression that the Mega Drive is capable of much more than it actually is.

But there are two effects in particular that put Jon Burton in the top-tier of Mega Drive developers. Firstly, the 3D escape from the moose: in the second level of Moose Hunters, you are chased by a moose. Mickey runs towards the player with a wonderfully panicked expression on his face, dodging obstacles and picking up apples that give him quick energy, while the world below him scrolls gently and three-dimensionally into the background.

A RICH LEGACY

STEAMBOAT WILLIE

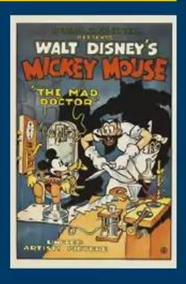
1928



Steamboat Willie is officially acknowledged as the first cartoon appearance of Mickey Mouse. It was one of the first animated films to synchronise sound and image, and it also features the dancing and whistling Mickey who has opened most Walt Disney Animation Studios productions since 2007.

THE MAD DOCTOR

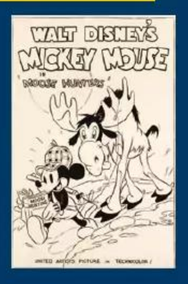
1933



The world of *The Mad Doctor* also serves as the cover artwork for *Mickey Mania*. The seven-minute black-and-white film centres around Dr XXX, who has kidnapped Pluto in order to transplant his head onto a chicken's body. It is a surreal experience that, unlike the game, turns out to be a dream in the cartoon.

MOOSE HUNTERS

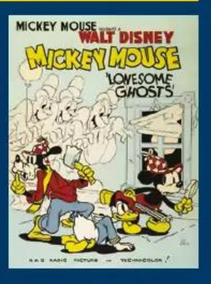
1937



The 1937 *Moose Hunters* should not be confused with the very similar *The Moose Hunt*, released six years prior, in which Pluto officially made his first appearance. In *Moose Hunters*, Mickey travels with Goofy and Donald, trying every silly trick in order to hunt a rampaging moose.

LONESOME GHOSTS

1937



Like *Moose Hunters*, *Lonesome Ghosts* in the game is very different from the original. In the cartoon, Mickey, Donald and Goofy are lured into a haunted house by four bored ghosts who want to play mean tricks on them. A sort of prequel to *Ghostbusters*, if you will, and, unlike in the game, without Pluto.

» [Mega Drive] For technical reasons, the trolley level lasts just under 20 seconds.

» [Mega Drive] In the first Moose Hunters level, the namesake keeps dashing across the screen.

According to Jon, a lot of clever trickery went into making this happen: the curved floor, for example, doesn't use any complex mathematics, just extremely well-timed colour cycling in constantly repeating pixel strips, which consist of a curved graphic template whose individual pixels change colour in a very specific order – simulating the effect of fluid motion when these strips are stacked on top of each other, even though nothing is actually moving!

Mickey Mania's other jaw-dropping effect is an incredible rotating 3D tower in the style of the classic Hewson game *Nebulus*, which you run around as it rotates fluidly, with textured stairs, a stone surface reminiscent of bump mapping, and softly animated barrels tumbling around as additional obstacles. Which again is smoke and mirrors. In fact, this spectacular effect consists of exactly one pre-rendered animation, 192x16 pixels in size and 16 frames short, which contains a motion in one direction and some shading at both ends. The entire tower structure and its rotation are achieved by playing the animation backwards and forwards, and by moving and stacking it line by line, so that the entire rotation requires only 24 kilobytes of memory.

All this and much more made for enthusiastic reviews: the 26th issue of *MEGA* gave the game a whopping 90% and the conclusion, "A highly polished and thoroughly enjoyable romp that everyone will love." It received the same score in the 156th issue of *Computer & Video Games*, along with, "*Mickey Mania* is destined to be one of the year's best platformers."

The October '94 issue of *American Game Players* gave it a mighty 96, while *Mean Machines Sega*, the official *Sega Magazine* and the American *SegaPro* all gave it an 87 in their late-1994 issues.

All of this resulted in not gigantic, but still very solid sales, as Jon recalls, "The last numbers I got were around 400k copies for the Mega Drive version. The game on all formats sold around 2.5 million copies."

A more-of-the-same style sequel was to follow immediately, with Jon working on expanding its technology significantly (see the Lost Mickey panel) – but then a more promising topic came up. "Disney Interactive asked us if we would be interested in making the official game for that new computer-generated film they and Pixar were working on: *Toy Story*. We all quickly decided that this would be a better project to pursue than *Mickey Mania 2*."

Catching up on the original game today isn't easy, as there have been no official re-releases. But if you ever get the chance, don't miss out! *Mickey Mania* may not offer much special in terms of content, but you have to play it for the technical sensation alone. There were so many technically impressive games on the Mega Drive, like *Thunder Force 4* or *Rocket Knight Adventures* – and this is right up there with them.

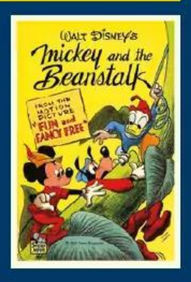
With the benefit of hindsight, there's not really that much that Jon would change about his game. In 2017, he released a director's cut of *Sonic 3D*, another game he wrote, which fixed many of the game's original problems. When asked if he could see himself doing something similar with *Mickey Mania*, his answer was, "I could easily do a director's cut – I just don't think there's much I would change. It was generally received as a good enough game, whereas *Sonic 3D* wasn't remembered so fondly. If people have suggestions for changes I'd certainly consider it." The only thing he could think of off the top of his head that he would change would be to give the players more marbles – he acknowledges there are too few of them in the game, and the whole thing does become incredibly difficult when you have to get by without them.

Either way, he looks back on *Mickey Mania* with great pride, "I still play it from time to time. I still really like the game, it's in the top five of the ones I've made." ✱

THE SHORT FILMS THAT MICKEY MANIA WAS BASED ON

MICKEY AND THE BEANSTALK

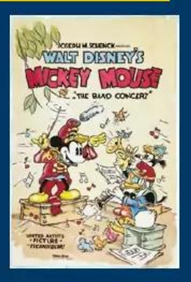
1947



Mickey And The Beanstalk is not a stand-alone cartoon, but rather part of a feature-length mix of live-action and animation called *Fun And Fancy Free*. Its first part is about Bongo The Bear who escapes from his circus, and the second part features Mickey, Donald and Goofy who climb a giant beanstalk.

THE BAND CONCERT

1935



Mickey Mania's well-hidden bonus level is based on the 1935 short film *The Band Concert*, in which MC Mickey desperately tries to conduct a constantly distracted band. Not only was this the first full-colour Mickey Mouse cartoon, it was also a technical masterpiece, with impressive synchronisation of picture and sound.

THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER

1990

The only film in the *Mickey Mania* game that is halfway modern, it is based on the 1881 novel of the same name by Mark Twain. The story once again revolves around the trio of Mickey, Donald and Goofy, although of those only Mickey remains in the game – albeit three times. This film is used for *Mickey Mania*'s grand finale.

Game Genie

» **PLATFORM:** NES » **YEAR:** 1990 » **COST:** £40 (launch), £20+ (today, boxed), £12+ (today, unboxed)

Once upon a time, gamers had to use POKES and PEEKs to get the upper hand in videogames, or simply scour magazines for codes and cheats. The Game Genie series by Codemasters took the process one step further and allowed you to temporarily modify the very data of the game you were playing, meaning you could add infinite lives, change the parameters of a character's movement and much more.

Being able to hack the likes of *Super Mario Bros* and *Contra* made the device very popular with gamers, but not so much with Nintendo. Its release led to a fierce legal battle with Nintendo that the big N ultimately lost and opened the floodgates to a host of copycat clones appearing in the years that followed. The Game Genie certainly wasn't perfect however and its design meant prolonged use could lead to bent pins and damaged consoles. Although units initially shipped with included codes, gamers were encouraged to find their own or sign up to a subscription service that would release quarterly code booklets for the latest and most popular games. ✱

ESSENTIAL GAME

Super Mario Bros

It makes sense that one of the NES' most popular games would have a large number of Game Genie codes for it, so that's the game we're recommending. GTTTTL lets you walk through enemies, AATOZE lets you start with nine lives, while inputting GOZSXX offers invincibility from everything in the game, including lava. There are numerous other codes that can warp the game in numerous ways and it's even possible to imbue the brothers with crazy jumping powers if you so desire.

Game Genie fact

■ Excessive force was required to use a Game Genie on the New-Style NES which was addressed by giving owners a new adapter that would work with the revised console.

SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

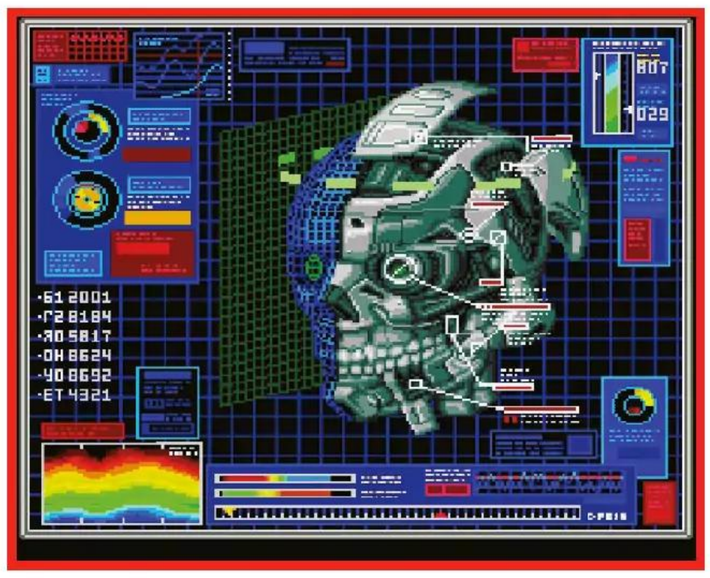
ULTIMATE GUIDE

SNATCHER

AS HIDEO KOJIMA HAS BECOME A RARE CELEBRITY IN THE GAMING WORLD, SO HIS OLDER WORKS ARE INCREASINGLY REVISITED. BUT HIS 1988 CYBERPUNK ADVENTURE SNATCHER IS ALMOST UNPLAYABLE TODAY, LEGALLY, AND ONLY RECEIVED ONE ENGLISH PORT - WHICH HAS ONLY INCREASED ITS CULT APPEAL, AND COST

WORDS BY MIKE DIVER

» [PC Engine] Gillian's Turbocycle allows him to visit many areas of Neo Kobe.



» [Mega-CD] *Snatcher*'s animated intro sequence sets the atmosphere fantastically.

Raised on movies, his parents encouraging him to watch them by himself from a young age, Hideo Kojima quickly turned to making his own short films. He yearned to become a professional filmmaker – but ultimately joined the games industry and took his first job at Konami in 1986.

After working on *Penguin Adventure*, an into-the-screen racer with platforming elements, Kojima got to implement his cinematic inspirations in 1987's *Metal Gear*, the stealth action pioneer's gameplay based on what he'd seen in 1963's Steve McQueen-starring blockbuster *The Great Escape*. After directing that breakthrough, he eyed something with far greater connections to the silver screen: *Snatcher*.

Narratively a mixture of *Blade Runner*, *The Terminator* and *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, *Snatcher* sets its story in 2042 (later ports updating this to 2047), in the fictional Japanese city of Neo Kobe. Here, after the 'Catastrophe' of 1991 which killed 80% of the Eurasian population, not to mention actual World War III breaking out in 2005, mankind is facing its greatest and gravest crisis.

A strange bio-roid lifeform is killing people in Neo Kobe and taking their places. They strike in the winter months, their purpose and origin a mystery. To combat this threat to Neo Kobe and the world, a new police force is established:

» [Mega-CD] Sometimes the references are very on the nose.

» [Mega-CD] Gibson's death in Sega's release is arguably more gruesome than the PC Engine version.

the Judgement Uninfected Naked Kind And Execute Rangers (aka the Japanese Undercover Neuro-Kinetic Elimination Rangers in the English-language release of the game). These Junkers are *Snatcher*'s Blade Runners; and the Snatchers themselves, its Terminator-like body snatchers.

> "SNATCHER'S WORLD WAS SIMPLY THE EMPTY VESSEL FOR THE ACTIVITIES AND LIVES OF THE VARIOUS CHARACTERS THAT YOU MEET"
> **HIDEO KOJIMA**

The player is cast as new Junker Gillian Seed, whose partner is killed very early on in a horrifically violent manner (how violent depends on what version of the game). It's Gillian's job to work out where the Snatchers come from and what they want with the people of Neo Kobe. Supporting characters include his estranged wife Jamie (the reveal of why they both have memory loss is a major twist in the story), Gillian's robotic support navigator Metal Gear Mk II (not the only reference to the game of the same name), and various Junker staffers and criminal ne'er-do-wells.

If the basic outline of the story sounds like a lot of cliches fighting for the spotlight – although late-game revelations do inject freshness – Kojima himself has never shied away from the fact that *Snatcher*'s big-screen precedents are worn so brazenly on its sleeve. Speaking in 1992, in promotional material for the game's PC Engine release archived by shmuplations.com, he said, "*Snatcher*'s story and setting isn't very good – we borrowed a lot from *Blade Runner*. However… the

SNATCHER'S MANY VERSIONS

YOU'D BETTER BRUSH UP ON YOUR JAPANESE

Snatcher was envisaged as a PC-8801 exclusive and released first for the Japanese home-computer line in November 1988. While compromised compared to later versions of the game it's still superbly atmospheric, with its crisp pixel art capturing a lot of personality and environmental detail. Arriving shortly after the release of the PC-8801 version, the MSX2 release was boxed with Konami's SCC+ cartridge, allowing for enhanced music. Its visuals are richer this time around but loading times are slower, which can lead to frustration when navigating the sometimes-obtuse command options.

Arriving four years after the home-computer originals, the PC Engine version of *Snatcher* takes advantage of the CD-ROM format with great music, exceptionally graphic visuals, voiceovers and adds a story-wrapping third act adapted from 1990's *SD Snatcher*. Its console-optimised controls are welcome, too and it's currently available to experience on the PC Engine Mini. *Snatcher*'s sole English-language port, essentially the PC Engine version with some additional updates including an exclusive intro and new ending, arrived on Sega's CD-ROM add-on in late 1994, after the Saturn's Japanese release. Its low sales have made it an expensive collector's item today.

There are two 32-bit console releases of *Snatcher* and we'll look at the PlayStation version first. Opening with a pair of CGI sequences, this February 1996 release screams its mid-Nineties production values from the beginning. Only released in Japan, it uses the PC Engine voiceover and therefore lacks acting in certain scenes, but features new music and redrawn visuals. The final version we'll be looking at is the Saturn version, which is essentially the same as the PlayStation version and released a month later. Sega's second *Snatcher* – this time a Japanese exclusive – reinstates some goriness that Sony's release censored and nudity that was removed for the Mega-CD release.

» [Playstation] The 32-bit versions of *Snatcher* are exceptionally polished, as you'd expect from mid-Nineties Konami.

world was simply the empty vessel for the activities and lives of the various characters that you meet, and the inexorable fate that they are dragged into unawares."

And it's the characters, not the cyberpunk-styled world around them (although Neo Kobe itself is very much a character too), who are the heart of *Snatcher*. Each of the main cast has a lot of screen time, and each imprints their personality onto the player, from Gillian's twitchy chief (what is with that picture of his?) to a cagey underworld informant called Napoleon.

As a narrative adventure game, *Snatcher* is mostly driven by menus to progress the story, move between locations, interrogate suspects and more. There's the occasional shooting sequence too, where the screen splits into nine sections with the player needing to direct their shots to one of the d-pad's nine positions (including the static centre) to either target specific body parts or take out smaller enemies.

At least, that's how 1994's Sega Mega-CD version of *Snatcher*, the only port to earn an official release in English-speaking markets, plays out, with on-screen prompts to Move, Look, Investigate, Talk and Ask – as well as scenario-specific options where particular pieces of evidence or lines of inquiry present themselves – used to navigate the experience.

Sometimes frustratingly, the player will have to repeat their actions to gain essential information, the game locking up until, at the third time of asking the same thing, whoever you're questioning finally gives you what you need. It's an inelegant system that makes some in-universe sense – after all, why would a suspect spill all straight away? – but it wasn't how *Snatcher*'s user interface was originally designed.

Both of 1988's Japan-only home-computer versions of the game, developed by Konami's in-house Team Metalslave for the PC-8801 and MSX2, map the adventure game standard verb commands to number keys. And that's far from the only difference. The imagery on screen is smaller than that seen in Sega's release, likewise its preceding PC Engine Super CD-ROM² version of 1993, from which the English game is adapted. Naturally the visuals themselves are compromised in comparison to the rich colours offered by both the Mega-CD and PC Engine.

Then there's the small matter of the narrative itself. Whereas the 16-bit *Snatchers* – and the PlayStation and Saturn ports that followed in the mid-Nineties – tell their stories over three distinct acts – Snatch, Cure and Junk – the PC games only feature two, something Kojima was never happy about. He'd initially envisioned the game having six chapters, but had to scale back his ambitions due to the technological limitations of the era, and almost certainly budget constraints. He might have

LOCALISER Q&A: JEREMY BLAUSTEIN

JEREMY BLAUSTEIN, NOW CEO OF LOCALISATION AGENCY DRAGONBABY, SUPERVISED THE ENGLISH LOCALISATION OF SNATCHER FOR THE MEGA-CD

How did you come to work on the English-language version of *Snatcher*?
I was asked by R&D to give my opinion as to whether or not *Snatcher* would be enjoyed by the English audience. I very enthusiastically said yes, it would potentially be very welcomed. I was completely immersed in the game, and I absolutely loved it. When R&D requested that I be temporarily transferred from the International Business Department to them, to work directly on the conversion and localisation, it was a dream come true.

***Snatcher* is very text heavy, and this was an early job for you in your career. Were you intimidated by it, or did excitement take over?**
This was the only localisation project I worked on while an employee at Konami, and the translation was done by Scott Hards, who I personally selected for the job. When I received the translated text from him, I immediately knew this was something special. He'd injected a lot of humour and personality into the characters. I added extra content, and directed the voiceover sessions in Chicago. I never felt intimidated, only excited to be working on such an interesting and fun project.

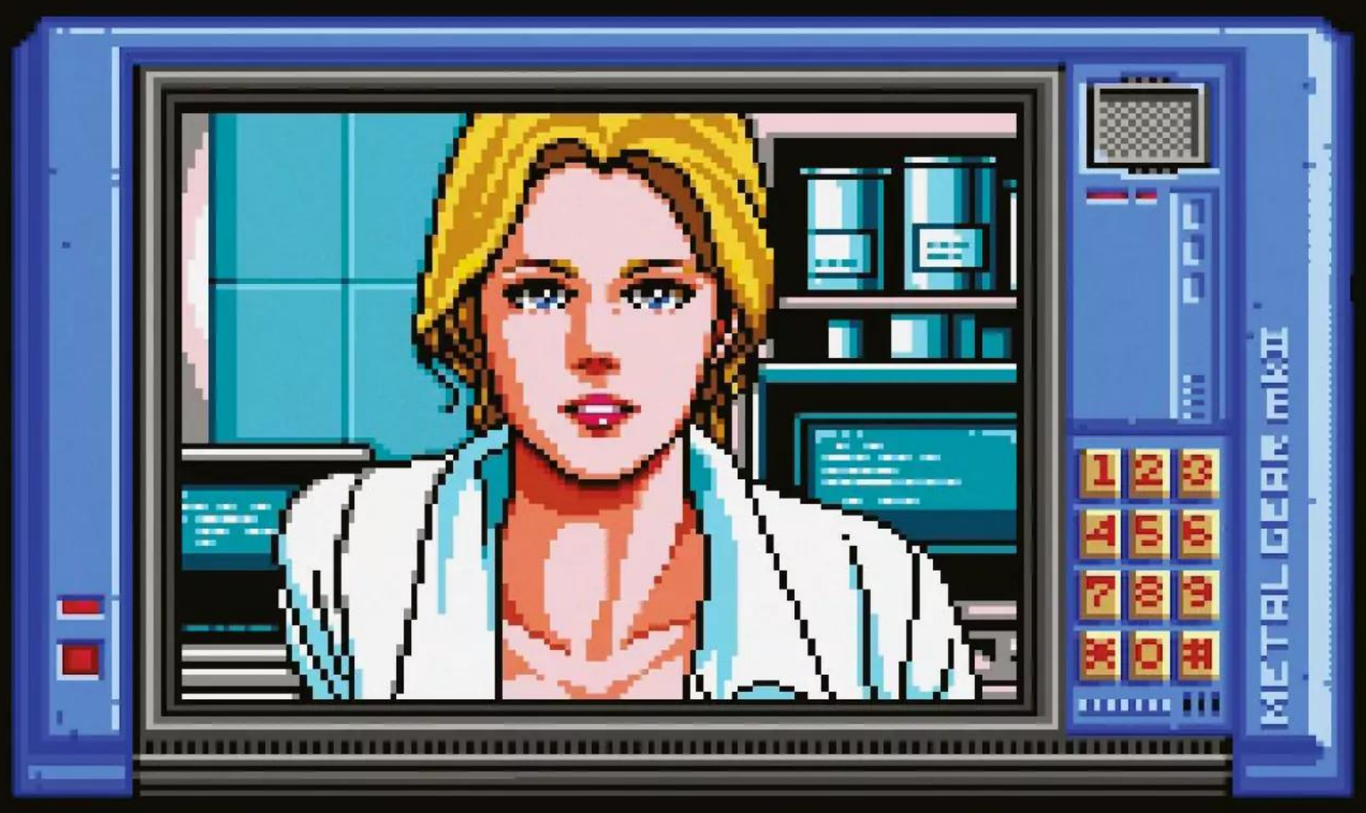
There are some differences in the game's content, from version to version. Can you speak about any of that?
I think that Mr Kojima had borrowed enough from foreign movies that there weren't many particular cultural differences (between Japanese and English releases) that loomed large. I changed whale meat to buffalo meat (a vital clue in Gillian's investigation) because there was concern that anti-whaling activists might be bothered. In addition, I changed the age of (Jean-Jack's daughter) Katrina from 14 to 18 due to the sexual nature of some scenes. The clientele in Outer Heaven (a club Gillian visits) were originally non-Konami characters that they didn't have the rights to (like the Alien xenomorph), so we changed them to Konami characters.

» [Mega-CD] Blaustein changed Katrina's age from 14 to 18.

Nowadays, such changes can lead to online petitions and complaints about censorship, from certain sections of the gaming public. What are your thoughts on that?
Regarding changing Katrina's age, you could previously peep on her while she's taking a shower, and examine her panties. I doubt anyone would take issue with changing her age from 14 to 18, especially Mr Kojima. I suppose other issues (like depictions of violence and nudity) lead to disagreement. However, the company has the right to decide how they want to release a product. The consumer then consumes or rejects it.

It feels like *Snatcher*'s cult popularity has grown immensely amid modern players, but is that something you see yourself?
I don't actually think its legacy has been growing, but I might be wrong. Not many people talk about *Snatcher*, and that's unfortunate because it's a tremendously entertaining game. I certainly hope more people play the Sega English version.

***Snatcher* received Japan-only Saturn and PlayStation ports, but do you know why no other English-language versions came out?**
I don't know the reason for the failure to release it again in English. Perhaps it's because of the difficulty of converting it, or perhaps it's due to legal reasons. There was a lot of potential copyright infringement, if I recall correctly, not to mention the fact that we never signed contracts with the voice actors in those days. I just don't know.



HANG UP
LOOK
TALK
ASK
ASK OUT ON DATE
SHOW POSESSIONS

» [Mega-CD] Gillian can use the videophone almost anytime, including to bother his wife at work.

ミカ
どこから案内しましょうか？

» [PC-Engine] Mika shows Gillian around Junker HQ as the player gets to grips with the menu system.

"I LOOKED INTO THE MEGA-CD'S TINY USER BASE AND I WAS VERY CONCERNED"
JEREMY BLAUSTEIN

» [Mega-CD] The Snatchers have to put those dead humans somewhere.

» [Mega-CD] Gibson's pet meets a brutal end in a scene censored in other versions.

JUMP OUT
HIT CLIFF
DRIVE INTO SANDPILE
PRESS BUTTON
PRAY TO GOD

» [Mega-CD] When Snatchers sabotage the Turbocycle there's only one choice.

» [PC-Engine] The chief's office contains a major clue to Gillian's investigation if you can picture it.

BEYOND SNATCHER

SNATCHER'S KAWAII ROLE-PLAYER AND RADIO PREQUEL

Snatcher owes its three-act storyline to 1990's *SD Snatcher*, a cute-looking RPG based on 1988's original which takes some creative liberties and adds a clearer, cleaner conclusion.

An MSX2 exclusive, *SD Snatcher* turns *Snatcher*'s characters into 'super-deformed' avatars with large heads, cartoony facial features and tiny bodies. The game's exploration plays from a *Final Fantasy*-like top-down perspective, with turn-based battles presented in a *Phantasy Star* first-person view. The game increases the number of enemy encounters and adds new mechanical nasties to blow away.

Whereas the 1988 versions of *Snatcher* end with Gillian discovering a Snatcher has infiltrated Junker HQ, *SD Snatcher* reveals further sinister connections with Kremlin experiments and a plan to replace world leaders with android impersonators. Spoilers, but the Snatchers are very much a man-made menace. This ending was adapted into later *Snatcher* releases.

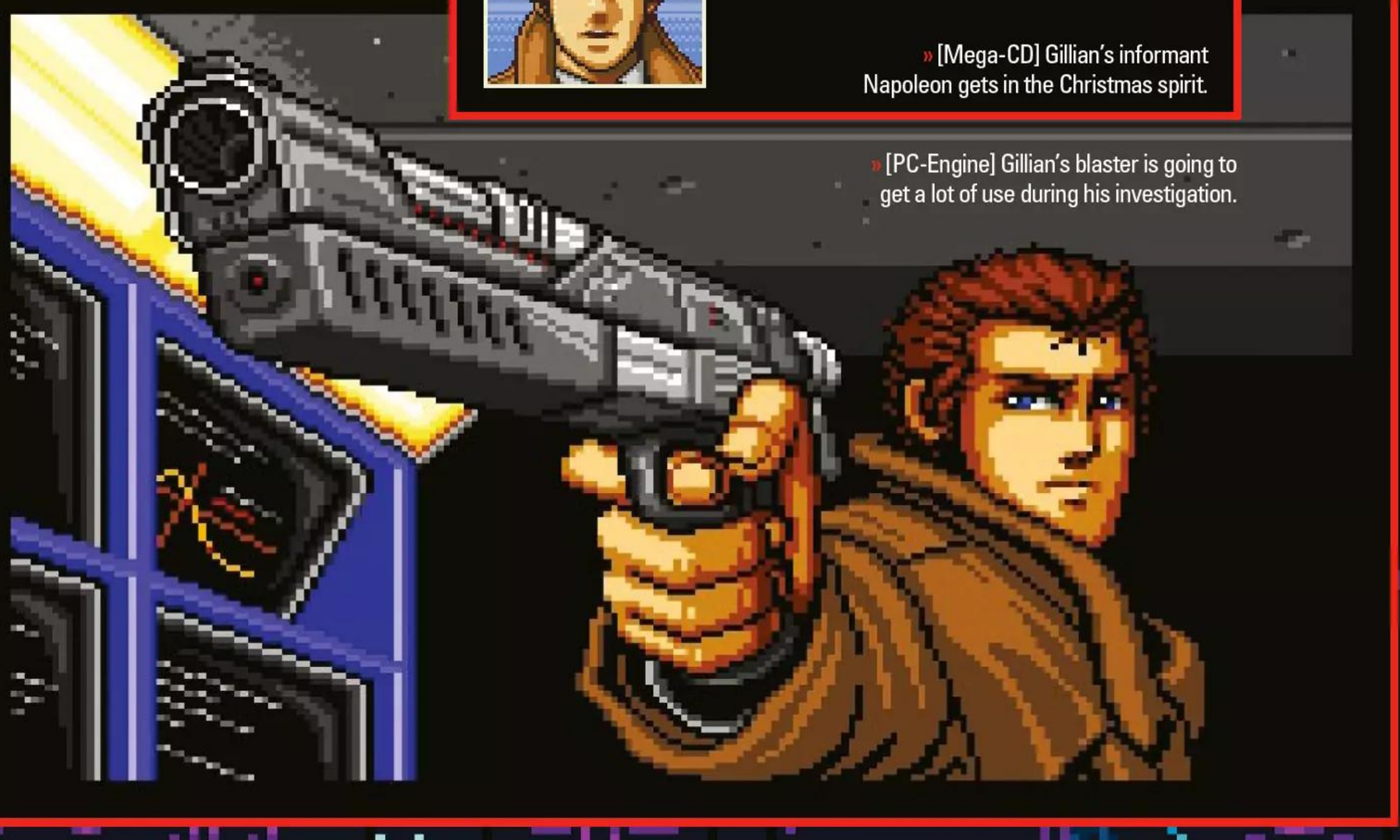
Sdatcher, a radio drama written by game developer Goichi Suda (aka SUDA51), scored by *Silent Hill* series composer Akira Yamaoka and starring Kojima as the navigator Little John, expands the story further. A prequel to *Snatcher*, it focusses on Junker Jean-Jack Gibson as he investigates the Snatcher menace only to eventually discover, devastatingly, that his own wife has been replaced by a Snatcher. Translations of both *Sdatcher* and *SD Snatcher* can be found online.

Suffering from after-effects of the cryogenic sleep, which is believed to have lasted for a long time, his past is deeply shrouded in mystery...
The first door you see after going through the door over there is the "chief's room". Further to the back are the "mechanic room" and the "clinic room" respectively.

» [MSX2] It may look cute but *SD Snatcher*'s themes are still dark.

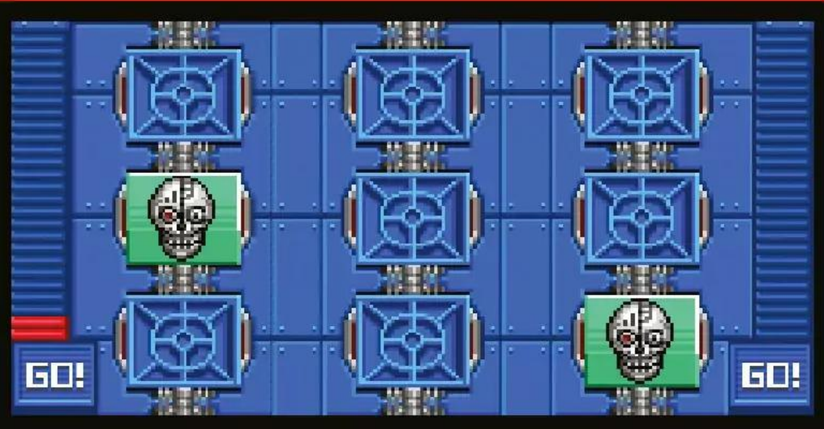
"I THINK SNATCHER HAS A LONG-LASTING FAME, AND I HOPE THE GAME WILL NOT BE LOST TO HISTORY"
JEREMY BLAUSTEIN

» [Mega-CD] Gillian's informant Napoleon gets in the Christmas spirit.



» [PC-Engine] Gillian's blaster is going to get a lot of use during his investigation.

» [Mega-CD] Neo Kobe taxi drivers cannot be trusted.



» [PC-Engine] Gillian can test his aim and reactions in the shooting range at Junker HQ.

been riding high after *Metal Gear*, but the Kojima of 1988 was still a decade away from releasing the PlayStation stealth action hit *Metal Gear Solid* and attracting global acclaim. Ergo, nobody was writing him blank cheques.

It was a reimagining of *Snatcher* that added the game's third act – which would then be adapted and incorporated into 1993's PC Engine version and all subsequent ports. 1990's *SD Snatcher* for MSX2 is a top-down role-playing game using cutesy representations of the game's cast – the '*SD*' stands for super deformed – which swapped shooting sections for turn-based battles akin to those of the *Final Fantasy* series. This third act reveals that the Snatcher menace stretches way beyond Neo Kobe, and even Japan, and lays out some shocking family matters. *SD Snatcher* received an English fan translation in 1993, but it's 1994's Mega-CD release that's the go-to for anyone coming to this game today.

Having brought *Snatcher* to life over its previous incarnations, Kojima didn't personally work on the Sega port – instead, it's directed by Yoshinori Sasaki, who'd later work on *Resident Evil: Revelations* and its sequel, with localisation supervision provided by Jeremy Blaustein. "I looked into the Mega-CD's tiny user base and I was very concerned, but I was hopeful that it would prove to be successful," Jeremy tells us in 2024. "Sadly, I was wrong." That small install base for Sega's Mega Drive add-on led to incredibly low sales for *Snatcher*, making copies wildly expensive today. "When you look at the high cost of the game on eBay, I think *Snatcher* has a long-lasting fame," Jeremy adds, "and I hope the game will not be lost to history."

At the time of writing, however, there's no way to legally play the English-language *Snatcher* apart from paying hundreds of pounds for a Mega-CD copy, nor does Konami show any obvious interest in re-releasing it. The PC Engine version is available on the PC Engine (CoreGrafx) Mini, but it's hard to play even with a translation app handy.

Fans wanting to deepen their connection with *Snatcher* – something Kojima foresaw, saying in 1992 that he hoped players would "develop the drama and the world in their imaginations" because "that's the 'true interactivity' of *Snatcher*" – can find English translations online for *Sdatcher*, a 2011 radio series that served as a prequel to the game, focussing on Gillian's ill-fated partner, Jean-Jack Gibson, with a script written by cult-favourite game developer Goichi Suda (*Killer7* and *No More Heroes*). It's there that the *Snatcher* story ends for now, but given how the game's cinematic inspirations weren't shy of a remake or sequel, and modern gaming's love of resuscitating old series, Gillian Seed and company may yet return, someday. ✱

SNATCHER'S MODERN LEGACY

JOHN JAMES' OWN CYBERPUNK ADVENTURE GAMES ARE INFLUENCED BY SNATCHER

What do you feel elevates *Snatcher* above its array of influences?
Snatcher's in-game computer, JORDAN, is cool – I wanted to have a JORDAN system in *2064*, which was going to be called MINERVA. MINERVA went on to be an information science organisation in *NEURODIVER*. But if you look at the 1988 *Snatcher*, it's more or less the same as other adventure games of the time. For example, *JB Harold: Murder Club* came out two years before and was just as cool. *Snatcher* is more recognised because of its English release – and because it's 'the other game the *Metal Gear* guy made'. It's unique enough when compared to Western adventure games, with a great cinematic feel, and a point of reference when looking back at Kojima's work.

Did you experience *Snatcher* on Sega's Mega-CD, or did you emulate it?
I emulated the game on a PSP. I was in the middle of my college years, and the Kojima connection was part of the game's appeal – but its screenshots also captured my attention in the same way as *Ys* for the TurboGrafx-16 and the cutscenes in *Phantasy Star IV*. It looked like an interactive anime! Those games were my gateway drug into the world of Japanese adventure games – and *Snatcher* pushed me into exploring more.

You got the English-language voice actor for Gillian Seed, Jeff Lupetin, involved in the crowdfunding campaign for *2064: Read Only Memories*. How did that come about?
We managed to get him to do some dialogue for our 2013 Kickstarter. He did Gillian's voice and mentioned Neo Kobe, but just to promote the Kickstarter. There wasn't any communication with Konami about it. I don't think they give a damn about *Snatcher*, not then or now, so we weren't worried.

» [PC] 2064: *Random Access Memories* has its own *Snatcher*-influenced shooting sections

2064 features some very *Snatcher*-like shooting sections – is it fair to say those are a direct tribute?
It's a tribute for sure. I think ours is a bit inferior to *Snatcher*'s, though, because our reticule doesn't recentre like theirs. Changing that wasn't really possible with our schedule. Those segments in *Snatcher* were really satisfying and super arcadey feeling, very kinetic.

2064 is a game set at Christmas, as is *Snatcher*. Another tribute, or just a coincidence?
Originally the game was going to be set around Halloween, but it was pushed to Christmas at least partially due to *Snatcher*, but also because it's a bigger, more widely celebrated holiday. Its sequel, *NEURODIVER*, is back to being set at Halloween.

Do you think a *Snatcher* re-release would translate to modern platforms easily enough? Or that it'd be a worthwhile remake project?
A collection would be cool – something that'd have all the versions of *Snatcher*, as well as *SD Snatcher*, with the added Pilot Disc (a PC Engine release with character biographies, developer interviews, a playable demo section and more). Konami loves doing collections now, but that'll probably remain a fantasy as I don't think they see any money in *Snatcher*. So, I think we're stuck with original hardware, emulation, or playing *Metal Gear Solid 4* with Snake in the trench coat to make him kinda look like Gillian, and blurring your vision so you think you're playing a weird action game version of *Snatcher*.

***Read Only Memories: NEURODIVER* is out now on Steam, Switch, PlayStation 5 and Xbox consoles.**

WHEN DINOSAURS
RAPTOR
1

Warpath: Jurassic Park

GUILTY PLEASURES

» PLAYSTATION » 1999 » BLACK OPS ENTERTAINMENT

When I was very, very young I would always say I wanted to be a dinosaur hunter when relatives asked what I'd like to be when I grew up. I actually meant I wanted to be a palaeontologist, but I could never pronounce it (even though the lengthy names of dinosaurs presented no issues for me). And besides, Dinosaur Hunter sounded cool. Sadly, while I never got to live out my dream, my fascination with dinosaurs has never left me (they're retro birds, after all), and I'll give anything a try if it has dinosaurs in it.

As you can guess, I'm a big fan of *Jurassic Park*, from the original book to the films and many countless games that followed. Yes, a lot of them aren't particularly good, but the licence is normally enough to pull me in and some of them are actually very impressive from a technical point of view. I even bought the recent Limited Run Games compilation so I could finally complete the SNES game, for example.

Warpath: Jurassic Park, as you can see from this page, is a very different beast to Ocean's top-down adventure and it's essentially *Primal Rage* with superior graphics. Actually, that's a little mean, as it's much better than Atari Games' one-on-one fighter, even if it won't give the likes of *Tekken 2* or *Street Fighter Alpha* any sleepless nights.

I've been fascinated with pop culture's portrayal of battling dinosaurs ever since I saw a Ceratosaurus and Triceratops fight in *One Million Years BC*, and while there are actually few dino battles in the first three films, it's still the perfect backdrop for a *Jurassic Park* game.

Make no mistake, this is not a polished brawler. It looks nice enough with neat mechanics like being able to eat animals and people to restore health, but it's surprisingly challenging and certain moves can sometimes be difficult to pull off. Things are further hampered by its madly swinging camera. And yet, for all its issues, Black Ops' game is a guilty pleasure and one I'm proud to have in my collection, even if I know it's a distinctly average game.

THE HISTORY OF EVERQUEST®

WITH THE ORIGINAL EVERQUEST HAVING RECENTLY HIT ITS 25TH BIRTHDAY, WE LOOK BACK AT THE GAME THAT POPULARISED THE MMORPG AND SET THE TEMPLATE FOR THE GENRE THAT HASN'T VEERED MUCH FROM EVERQUEST'S DESIGN ALL THESE YEARS LATER

Words By Adam Barnes

While we're not here to start a fight, the Nineties was arguably one of the most significant decades for gaming in its entire history. The leaps and bounds of technology came at a bullet's pace, and videogames came hurtling along with it: 3D graphics, optical discs, portable gaming and whole new genres of games just burst into popularity from one day to the next. But perhaps most significantly, there was the advent of the internet as people around the world increasingly began to connect themselves together through bleeps and bloops and digitised telephone calls. It might not have had the tangible visibility that Mario's transition from 2D sprites to 3D polygons had, but online gaming was perhaps the last great frontier for the industry.

EverQuest doesn't need much introduction, in all honesty, but all the same it was at the forefront of this technological train. But before we catch that one, we first have to go back to the start of the decade. Already by 1990, the term MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) was gaining traction. These text-based, online worlds enabled gamers from around the globe to join together in search of adventure and of new, more liberating

Scott Hartsman
» Scott worked on both *EverQuest* and its popular sequel.

Jenn Chan
» Jenn is the head of Darkpaw Games, the current custodian of *EverQuest*.

universes to inhabit. Richard Bartle's original game inspired the release of many other similar ones, in most cases co-opting the term 'MUD' with their own variant, and over the course of a few years these always-online multiplayer RPGs evolved and grew, incorporating a broad range of systems, themes, settings and player options.

It was from the mere existence of these games that John Smedley, then working at Sony Computer Entertainment America, would go on to secure funding within the American division of 989 Studios to build a 3D world in a manner that these popular text-based MUDs were able to draw in players. This was back in 1996, prior to the release of *Ultima Online* but backed by the successful release of *Meridian '89* – the first 'true' MMORPG – as proof that there was demand for such a game. "Kind of the core concept when we pitched it to people was: what if you could play a game of *D&D* with your friends, anytime?" says Geoffrey Zatkin, one of the game designers and programmers on the original *EverQuest* team. "What if there was a game that, wherever your friends were anywhere in the world, you could all log on and play together in a kind of good *D&D*-style fantasy game? As opposed to having to wait for Friday or Saturday when everyone had time off and could come to the same location." While MUDs had obviously been a foundational concept for *EverQuest*, Geoffrey emphasises that this desire to incorporate a tabletop RPG style of game into a 3D, always-online world was one of the core pillars of the base idea.

> "KIND OF THE CORE CONCEPT WHEN WE PITCHED IT TO PEOPLE WAS: WHAT IF YOU COULD PLAY A GAME OF D&D WITH YOUR FRIENDS, ANYTIME?"
> **Geoffrey Zatkin**

Geoffrey had been one of the first handful of hires on the project, alongside the likes of Brad McQuaid, Bill Trost, Steve Clover and other multi-disciplined people that were members of what they termed "the Design Council" who worked to solve technical and design problems that would consistently arise over the course of the game's development. The problem was that *D&D* and MUDs were good backbones for what the game was going to be, but there were so many additional questions that needed asking even before the answer could be formulated. "How do you deal with a ▶

party system when you have people spread apart?" Geoffrey recalls. "How do you deal with communications? How do you sell items? How do you trade items? What do you balance towards, is it singular play, is it party play? How do you make a game pace long enough that people will play it for months on end, because we had a subscription model to pay for the server costs? It felt like every single week in the design meetings, someone would come in and say, 'Hey guys, how do we do X?' And we'd give our best opinions, we'd argue it out and we'd try it."

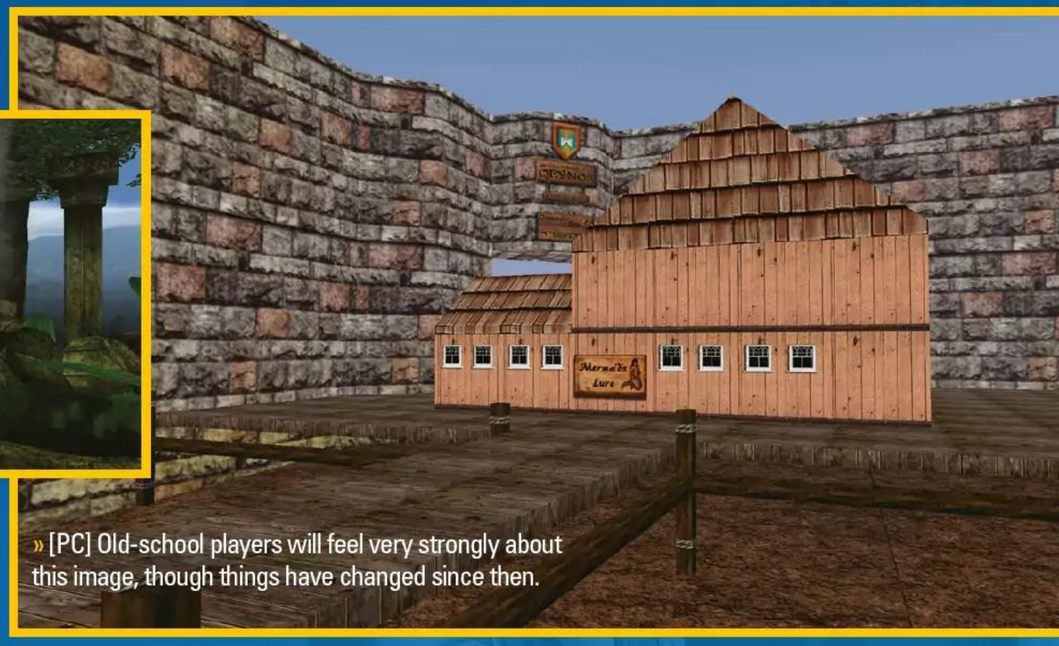
It was these meetings as the Design Council that such issues would be talked about for hours. A lot of the driving force behind this was Brad McQuaid, who wore multiple hats as part of *EverQuest*'s development but as producer was guiding a lot of what the MMO would become. "His secret was that he knew what he wanted the game to *be*," says Geoffrey. "He had what we used to call 'the vision'. Lots of us would listen to it and be like, 'That won't work, but what if...' and we'd get these multi-hour drag-out arguments. It was a bad place to be a designer if you couldn't argue for your thing, like certain kinds of designers that would be amazing wouldn't have worked well on that team. It was a very combative-in-a-friendly-way environment."

Many of the problems that popped up weren't just concerning the gameplay and various systems, but rather technical. This was an era of never before seen technological growth after all, and *EverQuest* was taking on both of the two critical advancements that came from the decade: 3D game graphics and an always-connected internet world. "Our biggest competitor when we were launching was *Ultima Online*, which was Raph Coster and Rich Mogul's game, and it was a great game," says Geoffrey. "But it was a 2.5D isometric game, and it's a very different thing to build than a 3D game just on a lot of the fundamentals. One of our earliest and riskiest decisions was, 'Would we require graphics cards?' Graphics cards were a new thing and it wasn't sure if that was going to be the thing that was going to be adopted."

» [PC] *EverQuest* differs from a lot of MMOs in that many zones feature content way above your current level.

Geoffrey adds that for the early reviews, graphics cards were sent out so that the reviewers were going to be able to play the game properly. "We were fighting new technology along the way," he says. "For beta, you had to have a cable modem. A lot of people had dial-up, but because our patches were so big, if you were trying to do it on dial-up you might not finish a patch until the next one was ready. We launched in 1999, people were still using dial-up modems in 1999 with 56K speeds and we'd be putting out half-gigabyte patches." For this eager, young group of game developers, however, Geoffrey says that "part of the fun of it was just figuring out not just the game, but all of the tech around the game".

» [PC] Like any respectable MMO, initial character creation is equal parts limited and somehow hugely important.



» [PC] Old-school players will feel very strongly about this image, though things have changed since then.

Stay Classy

THE 14 LAUNCH CLASSES, AND THEIR EPIC CLASS QUEST WEAPONS...

BARD

■ The adventurous minstrel weaves songs together by choosing the right motivating ditty (ie party buff) at the right time, and cares less for their combat potential.

CLERIC

■ Kitted out in armour and a mace, these healers are the most powerful in *EverQuest*. For a while they were the only class capable of resurrecting a party member.

DRUID

■ Despite being another class of the healer category, Druids are in fact quite flexible in their roles and are capable of using the powers of nature to deal damage.

ENCHANTER

■ The caster category has specialised roles, with the Enchanter fulfilling that of the buffer/debuffer – strengthening allies and weakening enemies.

MAGICIAN

■ By summoning elemental pets to do their bidding, Magicians supplement their direct damage fire and magic spells with the protection of their pet ally.

NECROMANCER

■ While the Necromancer has a wide range of abilities and skills at their disposal, their primary focus is on dealing poison damage-over-time and debuffs.

PALADIN

■ The classic 'holy warrior' class, this one, meaning a heavily armoured melee fighter who also has some healing spells and buffs at hand in a pinch.

» [PC] Well, returning to *EverQuest* still includes a spot of mount jealousy as other players wander by.

> "WE LAUNCHED IN 1999, PEOPLE WERE STILL USING DIAL-UP MODEMS IN 1999 WITH 56K SPEEDS AND WE'D BE PUTTING OUT HALF-GIGABYTE PATCHES"
>
> **Geoffrey Zatkin**

There was a bump in the road towards the end of 1998, however. After nearly two years of development, someone at Sony decided it was just going to focus its effort on the PlayStation, and that had an impact across all Sony-published titles in the works that weren't part of that goal. "Sony decided to cancel every game that wasn't a PlayStation game," explains Geoffrey. "Literally every single game. And Brad McQuaid and John Smedley went out to Sony and said, 'If we can get funding for this game, can we take this team and code and walk, and keep making it?' And Sony said, 'Sure, we're cancelling it anyway'." Luckily they were able to do just that, forming their own studio Varent Interactive to achieve this goal. "We were an indie group when we actually launched the game," adds Geoffrey, "and then a year and a half later got acquired by a different Sony entity." And so, in early 1999, *EverQuest* was released, and the impact it had was immediate. Despite fairly modest expectations from the development team, *EverQuest* very quickly became a massive hit. In just 24 hours the game had 10,000 subscribers, making it the fastest-selling online game at the time, multiplying to 60,000 a month later. By the end of the year *EverQuest* had overtaken *Ultima Online*, its 1997 competitor in the market, with 150,000 subscribers and went on to reach a peak of half a million by 2004. But none of this was a given, at least not prior to launch, "At the time *EverQuest* released there were many folks in the established AAA games industry who thought that there were maybe 100,000 people in the world who would ever be interested in that kind of game," says Scott Hartsman, who adds that was around the size of *Ultima Online*. Scott had been ▶

» [PC] The controversial Drakkin (dragon kin) city of Crescent's Reach was a necessity to help bring all players together.

RANGER

■ By combining elements of the Warrior class and the spells of the Druid class, this archer is a versatile damage dealer capable of good ranged damage.

ROGUE

■ The emphasis on stealth is a defining part of this class, but its high damage output through backstabs, piercing weapons and poisons makes them very formidable.

SHADOW KNIGHT

■ The Shadow Knight is a Necromancer Warrior. They're strong melee fighters who use the Necro's enfeebling spells to weaken enemies.

SHAMAN

■ The final in the trio of healers, the Shaman class is a strong healer with an array of enchantment spells and debuffs available to help turn the tide.

WARRIOR

■ The standard melee fighter class is present in *EverQuest*, too, but is in fact the strongest tank in the game with abilities designed to draw enemy damage.

WIZARD

■ If you're looking for a damage dealer, then try Wizards. They might not have as many spells that other casters have, but for damage potential they're unparalleled.

MONK

■ With their martial arts combat, Monks are not especially interesting in the early levels but level-up to become one of the game's most flexible melee fighters. Another interesting aspect of Monks is their useful ability to feign death at higher levels. Even when they choose to stick to only their fists, Monks still remain truly formidable foes.

Expanding Everquest

THE EXPANSION PACKS THAT MEANT THE MOST TO EVERQUEST PLAYERS

RUINS OF KUNARK

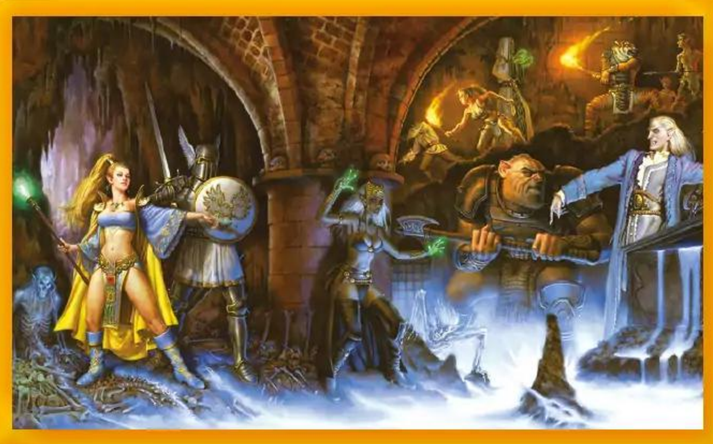
This was the first expansion pack released for the game and came out roughly a year afterwards, giving players a new lizard-like race called the Iksar, the new continent of Kunark to explore, epic class weapon quests, a raised level cap and plenty of group content to beat.

PLANES OF POWER

Regarded as one of *EverQuest*'s best expansion packs, *Planes Of Power* arrived in October 2002. For players at the time it was adored for its great raid and group content, as well as adding in a travel hub where players could skip those long boat raids to get around the game's growing world.

LOST DUNGEONS OF NORRATH

While the September 2003 expansion pack of *LDON* is divisive among the *EverQuest* player base, the fact that it brought in instanced content makes it important. While it did have an impact on the 'alive' feeling of the world, it was a necessary change to allow players of all types to take on group content way more easily.



THE SERPENT'S SPINE

As an overall package, 2006's *TSS* is perhaps one of the most refined expansion packs for the game. The new Drakkin race had a lot of appeal and their neutral city where all races were welcome helped (controversially) to bring disparate players together. Being able to level 1 through to 70 with just this ex-pac alone was a nice bonus, too.

HOUSE OF THULE

Despite releasing in 2010, *HOT* is considered to be part of the 'modern' era of *EverQuest*. All the same, it's widely regarded as one of the best 'modern' ex-pacs for all types of players with plenty of new content, some really interesting new zones and, for those that had been demanding it for years, player housing.

the technical director on *EverQuest*, *EverQuest II* as well as the executive producer on the sequel. "A game that requires a modem? A game that requires a 3D card too? Insanity. The conventional wisdom while it was in development was that this was absolute folly and a complete waste of time and money. Those of us from the MUD generation of social adventures always knew that worlds like this could go much wider, but no one expected this level of success."

Yet while there had been some criticisms pointed *EverQuest*'s way when it released – primarily around its lack of explanation and player guidance, but also its fairly simple combat system – the game received plenty of GOTY awards and has regularly appeared in top 100 games of all time lists that periodically make the rounds. Most importantly, however, and unbeknownst at the time, it had set in stone the template for what would go on to be known as the MMORPG genre. Even *World Of Warcraft*, the phenomenon that would surpass *EverQuest*'s successes by unfathomable amounts, took what *EverQuest* had started and streamlined it for a mass appeal, which in turn inspired countless other MMOs in the decades that followed. In fact, even the terminology that was used to denote various aspects of the game went on not only to define similar equivalents in MMOs, but became industry standard for gamers and developers alike. DOT (damage over time), CC (crowd control), buff and debuff and countless others that have become standard gamer lexicon originate from *EverQuest*.

Funnily enough, however, the decision for a sequel was made long before any of this success was realised. Expansions were a given and immediately put into development, but so modest were those initial expectations among the team that they had already decided to develop a sequel even before the original game's release and ensuing popularity. "It's important to keep in mind that *EverQuest II* was originally run by Brad McQuaid, who'd ideally be answering these questions," says

» [PC] Qeynos is one of the most populated cities in the game, but some players chose to 'home' themselves in quieter spots.

> "THE ORIGINAL RENDERER FOR EVERQUEST CAME FROM A RACING ENGINE FOR A PLAYSTATION (I BELIEVE) GAME"
>
> **Scott Hartsman**

Scott. Sadly, Brad passed away in 2019, but it's clear that his vision for what *EverQuest* was had been the guiding hand of the series for years. "While Brad truly loved *EverQuest*, he always wanted to create something even more massive in scope and scale," recalls Scott. "Norrath wasn't big enough in his mind. Not alive enough. Not detailed enough. *EverQuest II* and his later game *Vanguard*, were intended to be leaps in all those directions."

Rather unexpectedly, however, *EverQuest II* wasn't intended to be a replacement for the original. Set in an alternate future of Norrath some 500 years after the events of *EverQuest*, it was meant to offer a different sort of *EverQuest*, a different sort of world, a different sort of MMO. On a technical front there were obvious opportunities for improvements, not least since the fidelity of 3D graphics had already evolved significantly in the five years between the two versions. Crucially, though, was that now that *EverQuest* had proven itself, it was a chance to do things properly. "The original renderer for *EverQuest* came from a racing engine for (I believe) a PlayStation game," says Scott, "which was massively adapted, then entirely rewritten a few expansions later." For the sequel, the team was getting a purpose-built engine intended for an MMO from the start. "Original *EverQuest* had a triggered scripting system that was quite literally NPC's shouting invisible-to-players text at each other," explains Scott of one critical improvement the new engine was getting. "*EverQuest II* would get real scripting from day one to give designers the power to make more interesting content, more reliably."

Perhaps the most contentious portion of the work went into the design of the sequel, however, with differing perspectives on what needed to be changed and why. *EverQuest II* wasn't looking to be a fix-all for the issues that the community of players were having with the original game, though the *EverQuest* community was quickly becoming a deciding factor on how the franchise would continue to grow from those early years. "Going for a more alive world was a universal part [of *EverQuest II*'s design]," says Scott, "which it did succeed at doing some interesting things with, along with making exploration and collection a core part of gameplay, which was new to *EverQuest*. On the other hand, player interdependency in combat was a huge part of *EverQuest*, but the community was finding ways around that interdependency: kiting, classes that ▶

» [PC] Mistmoore Castle is the abode of the dangerous dark elf vampire Mayong Mistmoore.

» [PC] Wizards and spellcasters spent a lot of time sitting down and reading their spellbooks. Classic mage stuff, really.

Beyond Everquest

THE SPIN-OFFS THAT TOOK NORRATH'S ADVENTURERS TO DIFFERENT GENRES

EVERQUEST ONLINE ADVENTURES

■ In 2003 the *EverQuest* experience was brought over to PS2, reworking the gameplay to be more controller friendly. Set 500 years before the events of *EverQuest*, this PS2 MMO maintained a community that survived until 2012 when its servers were closed. There's a fan project called *Project: Return Home* dedicated to reviving the game on PC.

LORDS OF EVERQUEST

■ The world of Norrath was arguably well suited to an RTS what with its strong fantasy vibes and aesthetic, but *Lords Of EverQuest* (2003) – developed by Rapid Eye Entertainment – ultimately didn't do enough to stand out from the crowd at a time when making a successful RTS was a incredibly challenging task.

CHAMPIONS OF NORRATH

■ Perhaps the most successful spin-off for the franchise, this PS2 *Diablo* clone was developed by Snowblind Studios and released in 2004. It utilised the engine the dev had built for the fantastic *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* three years prior and a sequel, *Return To Arms*, was released a year later.

LEGENDS OF NORRATH

■ *EverQuest* sought to take on the TCG genre with *Legends Of Norrath* in 2007. While it had the clout for hardcore fans of the genre but was still accessible to those who were only coming over for the loot packs that could be redeemed in the MMOs, no further card packs were released after 2013.

EVERQUEST NEXT LANDMARK

■ This was a content creation tool initially released in 2016. Players could build detailed structures, environments and interconnected zones with other players that would ultimately be used in the next *EverQuest* MMO. Despite its massive potential, it was cancelled in 2017 following *EverQuest Next* the year prior.

Highlights Of Norrath

KEY PLACES FOR PLAYERS TO EXPLORE

1. RIVERVALE
This halfling town is a picturesque spot beside a small lake. It's not especially significant except for a vendor who sells both muffins *and* milk. IYKYK.

2. KITHICOR FOREST
This zone was unique in that it changed when the game time entered into night time, swapping out level 1-13 enemies for 40+ undead equivalents. A memorably terrifying zone.

3. OASIS
For those who prefer their MMOs with a desert tint, Oasis was beloved. Hunting crocodiles and orcs as the sun sets over the sandy plains is hard to beat.

4. GREATER FAYDARK
This heavily forested zone is a popular starting zone and highlights *EverQuest* at its best. The Wood Elf city of Kelethin is particularly wow-worthy.

5. GUK
Upper and Lower Guk divide this dungeon into two halves, with the latter accessible from the former. Lower Guk is popular for grinding levels and farming loot.

6. SOUTH KARANA
Visually this wide open plain might not stand out, but it features a whole number of zone-unique creatures (including elephants) and even a high-level pegasus to shoot from the sky.

7. NAGAFEN'S LAIR
Deep within the Lavastorm Mountains is the home of a powerful red dragon by the name of Lord Nagafen. One of the original late-game dungeons, and incredibly popular.

8. OGGOK
What might look like a tiny (and quaint) seaside village actually gives way to a cavernous, underground home for a great many ogres.

10. BEFALLEN
As one of the lower level dungeons, the undead-riddled halls of this temple are a fond memory for many. Clerics, Necromancers and Paladins find it particularly fun.

12. PLANE OF SKY
Also incorrectly known as Plane Of Air, this high-level raid is a unique zone, a collection of floating islands that can only be accessed progressively by collecting necessary enemy drops.

9. THE ARENA
While this is not a particularly exciting zone, it's dedicated to PvP combat even on PvE servers. Sometimes tournaments with prizes were held here.

11. NERIAK
If you were playing an evil race, navigating the world and factions was a challenge. The Dark Elven city of hate, Neriak, would have been your home.

13. EVERFROST PEAKS
This frozen landscape is a starting zone close to the home of the barbarians at Halas. To exit you'll need to pass south through the low-level dungeon of Blackburrow and onto Qeynos Hills.

14. QEYNOS
Qeynos on the western edge of the map is one of the largest cities, with guilds and vendors aplenty. It's noteworthy for its questing and as a place to start levelling.

15. FREEPORT
The counterpart to Qeynos is Freeport, sitting on the eastern coast. It's popular for its boat routes, efficient city layout and for those who focus on crafting.

could solo dungeons, pulling, splitting, succeeding with 'suboptimal group configurations'... that kind of fun."

While these side-effects of the original's game balancing were obviously not intended, Scott admits that these became "core aspects of the *EverQuest* experience from the community's point of view" that had to be considered when designing the sequel. When the game was released in 2004 it was praised for its high-quality gameplay and significantly improved visuals and art style, though it was not seen as the genre defining release that its predecessor had been. More importantly, the community of *EverQuest* players found themselves at odds with what they had expected to play versus what the designers had deemed important to 'fix' from among those side-effects.

"The initial reception to *EverQuest II* was less than it could have been as a result," says Scott. "Repairing a lot of that disconnect in expectation was the dominant focus in post-launch *EverQuest II* through its first three expansions, where we intentionally shifted to a strategy aimed much more at providing the kinds of engaging fun people loved about the *EverQuest* franchise, without compromising the compelling group and raid experience." While the game did go on to reach its peak subscribers of 325,000 in 2005, it never managed to garner the same adoration that the original had. Even now it's still holding the candle to its predecessor, with something like a third of the active player base of the original.

» [PC] *EverQuest II* features a variety of different races, all of which have their own distinct abilities.

But therein lies the crux of what has made *EverQuest* so special. Despite its 25 years of existence, its world of Norrath has been thriving with a dedicated community of players. Not much has changed to the core values of classic RPG adventuring with friends, but annual expansion packs and a steady supply of content and updates has kept players coming back for its long life, and it's not like that is going to change any time soon. "Part of our player base keeps coming back because we keep expanding on different storylines and answering long hinted at questions," says Jenn Chan, the head of Darkpaw Games, the subsidiary studio of Daybreak Games (formerly Sony Online Entertainment) now in charge of maintaining *EverQuest* and *EverQuest II*. "Or sometimes, we choose to explore relatively new places that still 'fit' within the *EverQuest* world. That's not to say we don't spend time on quality-of-life changes to the existing game, because we certainly spend quite a bit of time working on improving the experience of playing *EverQuest*."

Jenn points to the passion of the Darkpaw team to keep telling stories and updating the game for the community of players as the primary reason it has even been possible to keep the game alive for all these years. "The real secret is the community of players that fuels the drive and at the end of the day," says Jenn, "the pride that comes with seeing players immersing themselves in the game and enjoying what we all worked doggedly to release." Even now after all these years *EverQuest* and *EverQuest II* are getting healthy doses of updates, not only with new content but in the way the game is played and enjoyed. "It's a delicate balance of not feeling completely out of place while also not feeling like we've already overplayed these characters or storylines before," says Jenn, who adds that making changes to the way the game is played needs to be tactfully handled. "Generally people are familiar with the UX and when it's changed too drastically all at once it becomes difficult for people to easily adapt."

> "THE EMPHASIS ON SOCIAL, CO-OP ADVENTURE IS THE CORE"
> **Scott Hartsman**

While Sony Online Entertainment did push for a third entry into the series known as *EverQuest Next* before it all crumbled to the ground back in 2016 and Daybreak was born, there's not been much talk of 'what's next?' for the historic MMO. But perhaps there doesn't need to be anything; perhaps it's enough that *EverQuest* remains steadfast in those core values that were decided on all those years ago. "The emphasis on social, co-op adventure is the core," explains Scott about what has kept the series going for so long. "Grouping was solidified in *EverQuest*. Raiding was essentially invented in *EverQuest*. Accomplishing challenges with friends is the most engaging thing there is. It's no different than why people play soccer, basketball, football – why have those endured for decades or centuries? The frustrations and the victories alike. This is the same thing, for people who prefer a bit of *D&D* in their day instead. And you get to make new friends while doing it. What could be better?" ✱

» [PC] The gameplay experience became more refined in *EverQuest II*, but those who didn't want that could still stick with *EverQuest*.

» [PC] Graphically speaking, *EverQuest II* definitely did its job with a lot more distinction between zones and a lot more detail.

» [PC] There was a lot of promise and potential to *EverQuest Next*. It's a shame it never came to fruition.

retro* GAMER's FAVOURITE...

DS ACRONYMS

When the SNES came out, many games were released with the prefix Super. A similar stunt was pulled on the DS with many developers finding a way to shoehorn the acronym DS into the titles of their games. Check these examples out

CASTLEVANIA: DAWN OF SORROW

Not content with getting DS into the game's subtitle, Konami also saw fit to lumber *Dawn Of Sorrow* with a truly aggravating touch-screen command that saw you hastily tracing an on-screen shape in order to defeat a boss. It's needlessly fiddly to pull off and detracts from what is an otherwise enjoyable sequel to the GBA's *Aria Of Sorrow*.

DIG DUG: DIGGING STRIKE

It's not the longest of games, but *Digging Strike* is still a decent offering that effectively combines the gameplay mechanics of the first two *Dig Dug* games. One thing we do like about it is how Taizo Hori is constantly embittered because no one he's trying to help has ever heard of him, due to his son Susumu being more famous.

ADVANCE WARS: DUAL STRIKE

The subtitle for Nintendo's first *Advance Wars* game on the DS makes perfect sense as battles are often fought on both screens. However, the title is actually referring to the fact that you now have control of two Commanding Officers, which adds a superb level of strategy. The story continues on directly from the first two excellent GBA games as well.

BLEACH: DARK SOULS

Although *Bangio-O Spirits* is the better game, Treasure forgot to add a D word in front of *Spirits* so we can't include it. Instead we're going with this surprisingly solid fighter that features characters from the popular anime series. It's not the most inventive Treasure game, but it's a slick brawler with a banging theme song.

PEGGLE DUAL SHOT

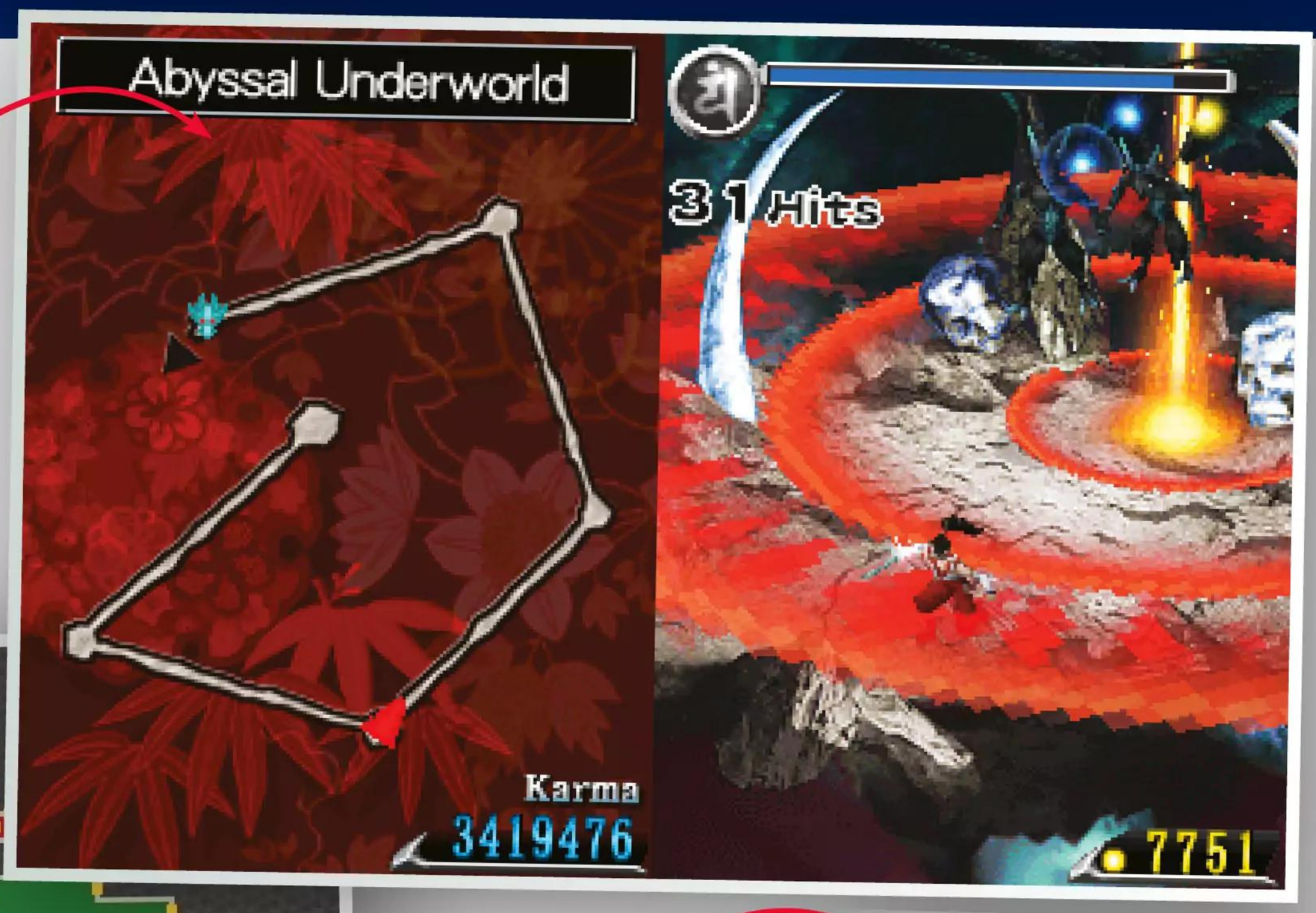
Aside from displaying the action across two screens, *Dual Shot* makes very little use of the DS' many novel features. It doesn't need to though, as the core gameplay is so polished and moreish that you won't stop to consider how bare-bones it is, you'll just want to pull off the ultimate shot so you can score as many points as possible.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSAI: DEVIL SURVIVOR

Considering the demonic heritage of Atlus' popular series, calling its first DS game *Devil Survivor* makes perfect sense. For those who haven't heard of it, *Devil Survivor* is an excellent strategy game set in modern-day Tokyo, which was specifically designed to introduce gamers to the series. It was later re-released on 3DS, but without the cool 3D effect.

NINJA GAIDEN: DRAGON SWORD

■ It's easy to imagine a Dragon Sword featuring in a *Ninja Gaiden* game, so kudos to Team Ninja for putting some thought into its title. Notable for using the same book-style presentation as *Hotel Dusk* (meaning you hold the DS sideways) and extensive touch-screen controls, *Dragon Sword* boasts clever little flourishes and a solid story. Don't miss it.



MR DRILLER DRILL SPIRITS

■ From what we can remember, there are no ghosts or high-quality alcohol to drill in *Drill Spirits*. There is plenty of drilling action though, particularly if you avoid the original US release which had a number of extras missing from it, including Dristone Mode in order to hit the DS' launch. Grab the Japanese or European versions for a more complete experience.

RESIDENT EVIL: DEADLY SILENCE

■ Can silence be deadly? Capcom certainly thinks so and went all out with its update of its original horror classic that was released to celebrate *Resident Evil*'s tenth anniversary. In addition to Classic Mode, *Deadly Silence* also includes the excellent Rebirth Mode which adds more enemies and some great puzzles that make excellent use of the handheld's unique features.

BUBBLE BOBBLE DOUBLE SHOT

■ It was slammed on release, but *Double Shot* is still fun in short bursts. Even though the new bubble-swapping mechanic is basic, you'll still have a good time. We've no idea what *Double Shot* means though, unless there's a nifty new type of bubble we've forgotten about. ✱

DOUG MACRAE

He put a bow in Pac-Man's hair and made nuclear war even more deadly. Doug Macrae, founder of General Computer Corporation, concludes that being a college dropout has its perks

Words by Paul Drury

Doug Macrae was different from most studying at the famous Massachusetts Institute Of Technology (MIT) – he had a car, a girlfriend and an arcade business. Whilst still a student, he founded General Computer Corporation (GCC) with fellow undergraduate Kevin Curran and produced 'enhancement kits' for both *Missile Command* and *Pac-Man*, the latter evolving into the biggest-selling coin-op videogame of all time, *Ms Pac-Man*. His company would go on to produce dozens of titles for Atari's home consoles and even develop an actual console for the company, the Atari 7800. You can see Doug and his GCC buddies in 2020's Netflix documentary, *High Score*, telling their tale with very broad grins.

» *Ms Pac-Man* was an incredible financial success for GCC. No wonder Doug is smiling.

We always liked the fact that the best-selling coin-op in history, *Ms Pac-Man*, was actually a hack. Is this an example of the 'genius steals' maxim?
That's a good quote but it was more that we were engineers. We looked at the original *Pac-Man* game and said, "It has some flaws and we'd like to fix them." It wasn't like, "Wow, we have this great creative idea!" We were looking at it as a product.

You had some of these 'products' right?
My brother purchased a Gottlieb *Pioneer* pinball machine and put it in his fraternity. When he graduated, he gave it to me to operate. I was a sophomore at MIT, brought it into my dorm and set it up, and it started collecting quarters. A lot of quarters. So I bought a second pinball machine… but as the machines get used, they need a lot of repair and so I brought on a partner, Kevin Curran, who was an electrical engineer. I was a mechanical engineer so together we were able to fix most of the problems. We reinvested the quarters into new pinball machines and also videogames. *Rip-Off*, *Asteroids*, *Battlezone*… we had about 20 cabinets on campus in the end.

That's quite an impressive business venture for two undergrads.
Yeah, it paid for our tuition [laughs]. We would split the revenue 50/50 with the dorm where the machines were… their half of the revenue went into the 'party fund' so everyone loved our videogames because they were supporting the parties!

A win-win situation! How did you move from operating arcade machines to hacking them?
It really started when we purchased a *Missile Command* game. That game was really popular with MIT students. It was played 2,400 times in the first week! The machine cost us $2,500 so we're going, "Wow, we've earned back almost 25% of the cost of the machine already!" We purchased a second one and then a third one because they were doing so well. Then in the second week, they had about 1,600 plays. 1200 in the third, 800 after that… it was an alarming downward curve.

Players must have been getting better at it?
Yeah, games were lasting much longer and people weren't staying up late to play this brand-new game. We knew there was a speed up kit for *Asteroids*, which just made it faster, but we didn't think that was fair to players, plus there wasn't one for *Missile Command*. So, in March 1981, while most college students were partying down in Florida on Spring Break, we decided to create a modification kit for *Missile Command*.

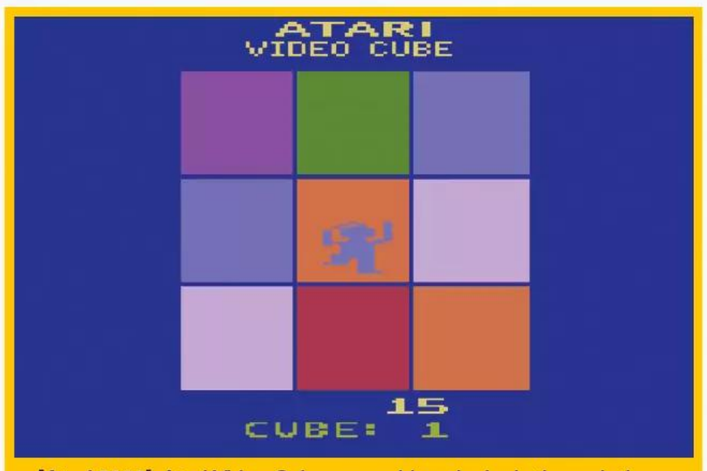
You beautiful nerds. How do you even go about modding an arcade game?
We knew we'd have to reverse engineer the entire code of the game to understand how everything works. We needed an in-circuit emulator to take the place of the microprocessor… and they cost $25,000. We borrowed the money from my parents, who didn't have much of a clue about videogames but said it sounded interesting.

Now you can access the code. Then what?
We'd start changing registers and code and watched what happened, "Ah, that controls how many missiles you get" and, "Oh, that controls the drawing of the airplane"… we spent a long time working out what

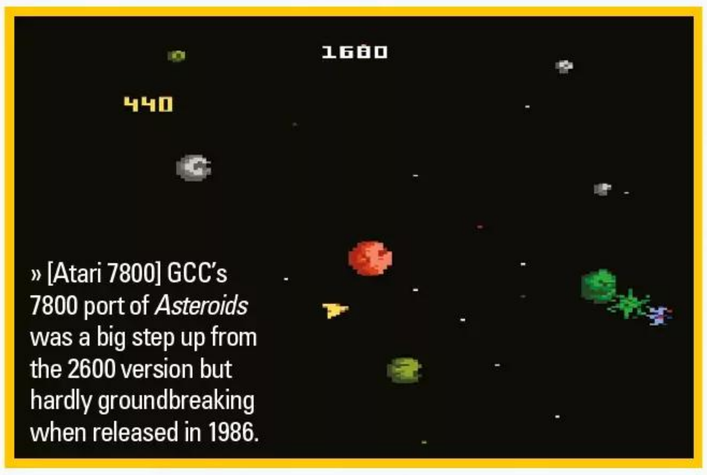
> “Everyone got rich from Ms Pac-Man – Namco, Bally and us”
>
> Doug Macrae

SELECTED TIMELINE

- **SUPER MISSILE ATTACK** [1981] ARCADE
- **MS PAC-MAN** [1981] ARCADE
- **QUANTUM** [1982] ARCADE
- **ATARI VIDEO CUBE** [1982] 2600
- **CENTIPEDE** [1982] 2600
- **MS PAC-MAN** [1982] 2600
- **JR PAC-MAN** [1983] ARCADE
- **POLE POSITION** [1983] 2600
- **REALSPORTS TENNIS** [1983] 2600
- **DIG DUG** [1983] 2600
- **GALAXIAN** [1983] 2600
- **ATARI 7800** [1986] HARDWARE
- **ASTEROIDS** [1986] 7800
- **ROBOTRON:2084** [1986] 7800
- **DESERT FALCON** [1987] 7800
- **BALLBLAZER** [1988] 7800



» [Atari 2600] *Atari Video Cube* was sold exclusively through the Atari Club, making it something of a collector's item today.



» [Atari 7800] GCC's 7800 port of *Asteroids* was a big step up from the 2600 version but hardly groundbreaking when released in 1986.

» The Brookline boys during one of the long sessions creating *Super Missile Attack* – Kevin Curran on the left, Steve Golson at the back on the TRS-80 and Doug on the right, taking a well-earned nap.

» [Atari 7800] Though GCC mainly produced arcade ports for Atari's home consoles, titles like *Desert Falcon* showed its range.

everything did and started playing with things. For example, we had the aeroplane shoot a missile really fast and suddenly it looked like a laser shot. "Hey, let's change the plane and make it into a UFO!" You have to remember we weren't creating something brand-new. Changes were made to make the game more difficult and more interesting.

Were operators keen to buy your kit?
We priced it at just under $300 and sold about 1,000. The hardware cost us $20 per kit so we made about a quarter of a million dollars. So yes, operators liked it.

That's a pretty good wage for working through your Spring Break…
[Laughs] It took us a bit longer than two weeks. We couldn't even attach a printer to the Genrad emulator so we set up a TRS-80 next to it and one of us would read the object code off the screen while another would type it in and then we could print it out on a daisy-wheel printer. We had moved off campus to a house in Brookline and we were working round the clock, in shifts – myself, Kevin, Steve, Chris Rode and Larry Dennison.

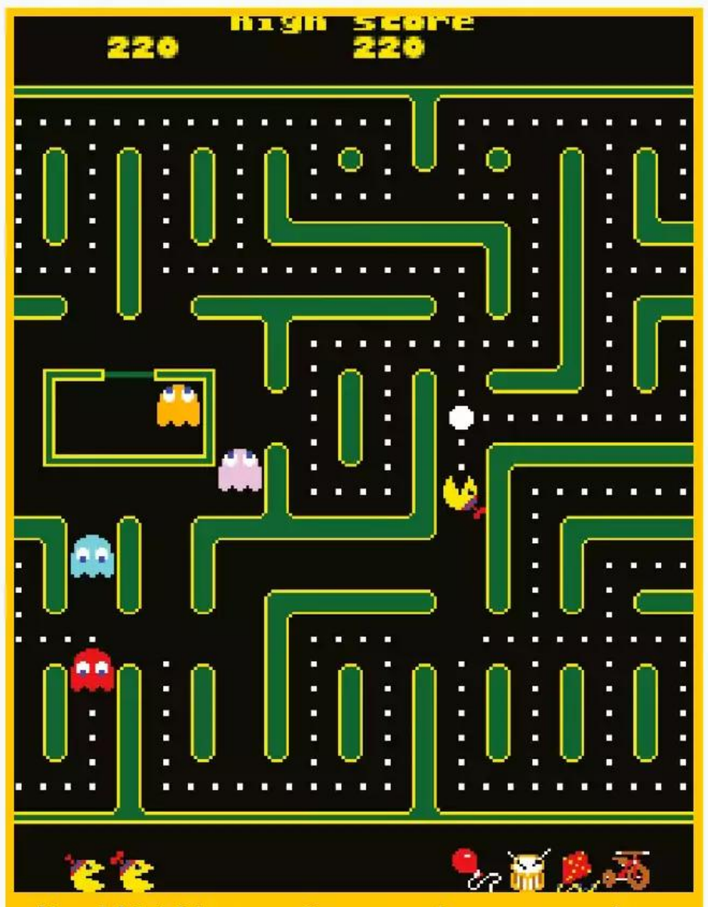
Weren't you worried Atari would accuse you of copyright infringement?
I took a class in intellectual property at MIT and we were quite careful with how we were going about modifying the game. If you copied someone's circuit board and ROM, that was viewed as illegal, so what Steve and Kevin did was build a little circuit board that was added onto a *Missile Command* board that would watch the address line as the game was running. Most of the time, it would be running Atari's code but when it hit certain addresses in the code, it would go, "Nope, run our code instead, then go back to Atari's."

Ingenious!
The way we viewed it was if you take someone's book, changed some words in it and republished it, that would be wrong. But if you made overlays and the book owner placed them over the pages, that would be like adding some comments in the margin, right? That's why we called *Super Missile Attack* an 'enhancement kit'. You had to own Atari's original *Missile Command* ROMs first and all we were doing was selling an overlay.

Atari's lawyers did come after you, though.
We thought that once they saw our kit, they'd see we weren't copying their game, what we were doing was legal, and move on. What we didn't realise is what we were doing was potentially catastrophic to Atari. Their business was selling $2,500 hardware and once that game got old, after three months or so, the operator would go back and buy a new game. They had built in obsolescence… but if an operator could buy a kit like ours which extended the life of a game, that would affect their sales significantly.

A lot was at stake for Atari and by extension, the whole arcade business.
Yeah, which is why they sued Kevin and me for $5,000,000 each and General Computer Corporation for $5,000,000 as well.

We always like the fact you called your company that, to make it sound like some big multinational when it was actually just a bunch of students in their house.
[Laughs] We thought that name would give us some credibility when we were advertising in magazines. We obviously didn't have $15 million and we knew the most Atari could do was shut us down… but we thought we were going to win, anyway.



» [Arcade] A daft hat, a scrolling maze and no escape tunnels – welcome to *Jr Pac-Man*.

And you did – sort of. Atari ended up hiring you to create videogames for them.
They said they would pay us $50,000 a month for two years to develop games but there was no stipulation of how many games we had to develop, how many employees we had to have or anything at all apart from we had to agree not to produce any more enhancement kits.

They were basically offering you $1.2 million to do whatever you want, which includes not doing anything at all.
It was essentially a bribe to make us go away. I think they thought we'd just sit on the beach or go back to college. We agreed [to the deal] but with two stipulations: that the case was 'dismissed with prejudice' so it looked like Atari should never have brought the case against us and that we would never develop an enhancement kit unless we had approval from the game's manufacturer.

> "While most college students were partying down in Florida on Spring Break, we created a modification kit for Missile Command"
> Doug Macrae

Is this because you already had another enhancement kit in development?
Oh yes. *Pac-Man* was the big hit right then and we could see it was the perfect game for an enhancement kit. It had two obvious flaws – you could learn the patterns and play for hours on one quarter and a game with only one maze was becoming boring. We learned from the Atari court case that we should change how the characters looked so there was no accusation of us using someone else's trademark, so we gave the Pac-Man character legs and called him Crazy Otto. I still can't remember why we came up with that name…

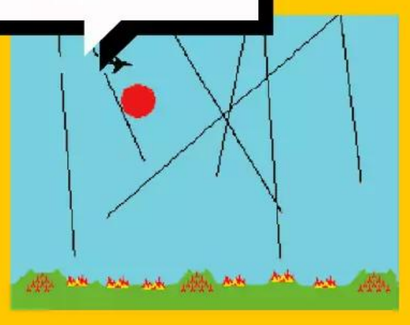
You created several new maze layouts for your enhancement kit and you also seem to have put in more randomness in the movement of the enemies.
I convinced an engineer I knew named Mike Horowitz to join our company and he studied the algorithms in *Pac-Man* which determined the movement of the monsters. Algorithms is almost the wrong word because it makes them sound really sophisticated and they were not. They just tell one monster to head to you, another to head to an area in front of you and so on… and they all rely on a timer. Start a game and do exactly the same thing as in your last game and the monsters do the same thing as well. It's totally predictable. Mike added in a pseudo-random number generator to change the timings and a few other things.

You gave them artificial intelligence, then?
[Laughs] That's what we said when we told the story years later but the monsters really aren't intelligent. We just made them a little bit more clever. At one point we had them being able to go through walls at certain times but that didn't seem fair so we got rid of it.

This time you go directly to Bally Midway, who had licensed *Pac-Man* from Namco for the American market, and tell them what you are doing. How did they react?
We showed them our kit and said, "You're aware of *Super Missile Attack* and how we beat Atari in court? Well, we're going to produce this anyway but we would like to do it with your blessing rather than waste time beating you in court." We were bluffing, obviously.

Did your bluff work?
We thought we were brilliant poker players

FIVE TO PLAY
Essential games from Doug's bulging back catalogue



SUPER MISSILE ATTACK
■ If you think you're good at *Missile Command*, prepare to be humbled. Everything is ramped up here and soon the missiles are streaming down the screen. Players have scored over 80 million on the original but the record for *Super Missile Attack* is just under a million.

MS PAC-MAN
■ Take *Pac-Man*, add new maze layouts, extra escape routes and a dash of unpredictability and you have an arcade phenomenon. Doug also had a hand in the 2600 port, which showed what skilled coders could achieve on hardware designed to run *Pong*.

QUANTUM
■ A highly original colour vector game, demonstrating how GCC was prepared to experiment. Using a trackball, you must encircle various particles, whilst avoiding contact. You can read more about its creation and its creator, Betty Ryan, in **Retro Gamer** 216.

DIG DUG
■ GCC produced a slew of fine arcade conversions for the 2600, along with plenty for the 5200 and 7800. We're picking this one as it's almost good enough to make our editor, Darran, play it [But not quite – Ed] and also, we dig Doug. See what we did there?

ATARI 7800
■ If the console had been released in 1984 as scheduled, it would've beaten the NES to market by a year and its impressive technical specs, backed up by dozens of fine arcade conversions, many handled by GCC, it might've stopped Nintendo ruling the US in the Eighties.

BRING HER HOME

How GCC powered the 2600 Ms Pac-Man port

■ GCC became the kings of arcade conversions, especially on the ageing 2600, with solid ports of *Dig Dug*, *Phoenix* and many others. Its version of *Ms Pac-Man* is especially impressive, given the critical panning Tod Frye's version of the original game had received only a year before. "We really wanted to make it great," explains Doug, understandable given it was their own IP. "I jumped on that project along with Betty Ryan, who had done *Quantum*, and a couple of other engineers. The 2600 only had two sprites and for *Pac-Man* [on the 2600], one had been given exclusively to the Pac-Man character while the four monsters shared the other one, which meant they flickered badly. We made the decision that Ms Pac-Man and the four monsters would share the two sprites, so they only flicker badly if they're all on the same horizontal line, which doesn't happen that much. We also changed the joystick code which was very important since the arcade games had a four position joystick and the home games had eight. If you were going up and then pushed the joystick diagonally up and left, we knew you wanted to turn left! That made all the difference in the gameplay."

» [Arcade] Ms Pac-Man: girl power, Eighties style.

> Jack Tramiel told us there was no money left in videogames and what was left was for him, not us
>
> Doug Macrae

▶ but actually, we showed up just as they were shutting down production of *Pac-Man* and were going to have to lay people off as they had no follow-on game to manufacture. They looked at our game and said, "Great but could you make it into a sequel to *Pac-Man*?" I mean, we had tried to make it look as different as we could because of the intellectual property issues! We said, "Sure, we can do that."

So *Ms Pac-Man* was born. Do you think having a female lead helped broaden the demographic appeal of the game?
A lot of articles have been written about what a brilliant move it was and how it brought females into the arcade and how they could identify with *Ms Pac-Man*… but at the time, that did not cross our minds at all.

An estimated 114,000 *Ms Pac-Man* cabinets sold in the Eighties at around $2,400 each. That is a lot of cash. Did you see much of the $270 million?
Oh, everyone got rich from it – Namco, Bally and us. Plus we had the $50,000 a month coming in from Atari. We leased a building within walking distance of MIT so we could make the pitch to seniors, "Hey, how about you come work for us? You get to develop videogames in a relaxed atmosphere, play games all day and you can probably even stay in your fraternity and don't even have to find housing."

That's a pretty tempting offer.
In 1982, I believe we were the largest employer of MIT graduates, beating out IBM, Hewlett Packard and Intel. We went from six of us to roughly a hundred employees in two years.

You created *Quantum* and *Food Fight* for Atari during that year, both highly original and non-violent. Was that a conscious decision?
I think it was more a desire to get away from firing guns at things. I mean, in *Food Fight*, you're still throwing things at people, but it's all in fun… and the tough thing is turning that first concept into something fun. Throwing a pie in someone's face or using a trackball to draw a circle round something moving in *Quantum* felt like it could be fun but as you're developing [a game], there's always the question in your head, "Do I have enough pieces here to make a fun game?" Both turned out very well and were moderate successes.

» GCC had a relaxed dress policy – Doug is second from the top, just above Steve Golson, in the annual 'ugly tie' competition. Steve was disqualified after failing a tie test.

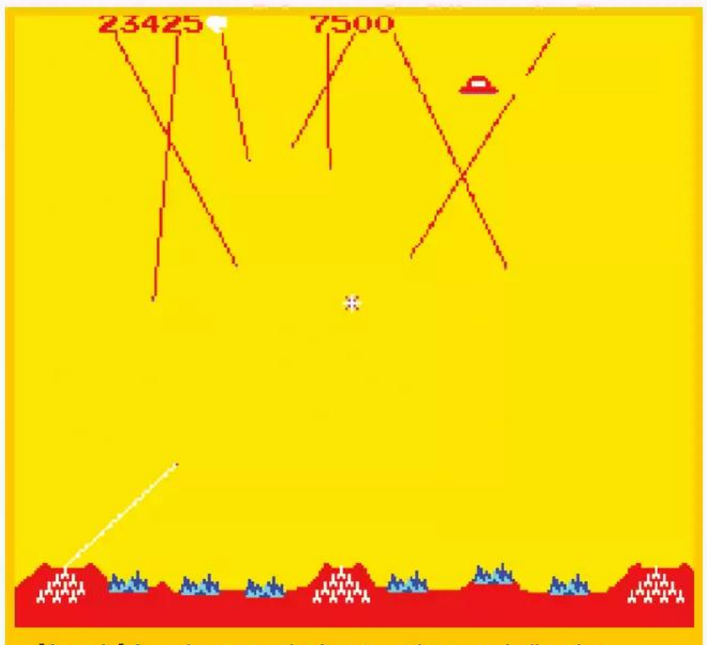
Up to this point, GCC had been making arcade games but then in 1983, you began producing titles for Atari's home consoles.
Again, we were in the right place at the right time. Atari had this great pipeline of potential [arcade conversions] but a lot of programmers had left to join Activision and Imagic, both started up by Atari employees frustrated at how much money Atari was making and not giving them the bonuses or the fame they thought they deserved. Atari had a void so asked us, "Would you guys be able to write cartridges?" And of course, being the young, arrogant engineers out of MIT and Harvard that we were, we said, "Of course, absolutely."

From a standing start, you produced some impressive arcade conversions in time for Christmas 1983, including *Centipede* and *Pole Position*.
Creating a close as possible rendition of an arcade game on an extremely limited machine requires a very different kind of creativity. The 2600 was kept alive longer than anybody ever expected by engineers trying to push its limits. The games we ported to the 2600 just amazed me at how much further the same hardware could be pushed.

Not content with making games for a home console, you actually start designing your own.
We heard Atari was producing a new console but it was only a repackaged Atari 400 computer and didn't have backwards

» "It's gonna be better than *ET*, right?" [l-r] Doug, Mike Horowitz, Steven Spielberg, Betty Ryan, Josh Littlefield and Kevin Curran.

» [Atari 5200] The abstract nature of *Qix* makes it a natural ally of GCC's own *Quantum*.



» [Arcade] Arcade games don't get much more challenging than *Super Missile Attack*.

compatibility with the 2600, which we viewed as a big mistake. When we were working on the 2600, we kept on saying, "Wouldn't it be great if we had lots of sprites?" A group of us started kicking around ideas and asking what would a chip look like that could do that. We had quite a few electrical engineers that had a little bit of background in chip design, particularly Steve, who went out to VLSI Technologies in California and got trained, and Tom Westberg, whose favourite game was *Robotron*. That game needs a lot of sprites so it became part of our design requirement – let's create a chip that can do *Robotron*!

An admirable goal. Your work evolved into the Atari 7800, which was due to be released in 1984… but didn't.
The console had gone into manufacturing and had been rolled out at the spring CES in Vegas that year and got very positive feedback. We had 15 to 20 games behind it, with very impressive graphics and a whole bunch of fun future options that were being worked on. At the same time, Atari was going through a financial crisis and Warner Communications, who owned Atari, had had enough. Jack Tramiel bought Atari and he saw computers, not consoles, as the future.

Did he tell you that in person?
We flew out to meet him shortly after he'd taken over and his first question was, "Who are you guys?" We told him we had developed most of the games Atari was selling and were happy to continue. He said there was no money left in videogames and what was left was for him, not us. He wrote us a relatively sizeable one-time cheque for our games he had in stock and for the 7800 and told us to move on.

GCC did move on, producing peripherals for the Apple Mac, notably the brilliantly named HyperDrive. You left GCC in 1993 and worked in the field of interactive television guides, founding the company VideoGuide and heading the Consumer Electronics Division for *TV Guide*, but you hadn't quite left videogames behind…
[Laughs] Years later, Kevin spotted one of the *Ms Pac-Man* and *Galaga* 20th anniversary arcade cabinets and thought, "Wow, they're manufacturing this again? Where is our royalty check!" We ended up in arbitration and eventually we got our royalties.

It's the game that keeps on giving. Doug, we have to ask – did you ever actually graduate from MIT?
No, Kevin and I are technically both dropouts. I completed all the coursework for my two bachelors and one masters but I had to write a final thesis and I ended up writing *Ms Pac-Man* instead.

Now you're retired, have you considered completing that thesis?
Oh no. I think graduating would ruin my image.

Thanks to Steve Szymanski for the GCC photography and Steve Golson and Martyn Carroll for additional help.

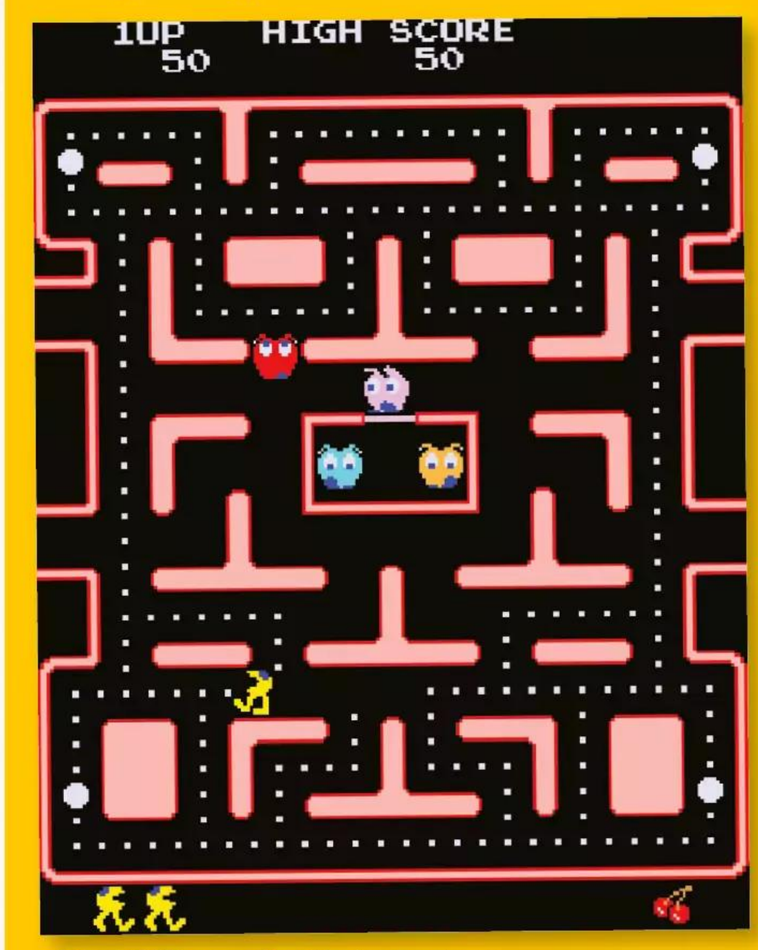
INTRODUCING…
THE NEW FEMME FATALE OF THE GAME WORLD
MS. PAC-MAN
The amazing Ms. Pac-Man offers all the fun of Midway's famous Pac-Man™ with four new mazes, added bonus fruit symbols that float freely through the maze, two new side exits that give four chances for get away and a unique cartoon series.
MIDWAY
VIDEO IS OUR GAME

» The flyer for *Ms Pac-Man* certainly gave her some sass, though being corner perfect in heels is a big ask.

PAC-MORALS

Because pixels out of wedlock just isn't right

■ "*Crazy Otto* had intermissions, like in the original *Pac-Man*," explains Doug, when asked how the game came to have a female lead. "The first one had him meeting a female character. In the second, they chase each other, like a Romeo and Juliet thing, and in the third, out comes Junior and they've started a family. At first it was going to be called *Super Pac-Man*, but the intermissions had a storyline of a female Pac-Man so it was changed to *Miss Pac-Man*. Someone noticed she had a child in the third intermission and as she wasn't married, this was seen as improper [laughs]. So we changed it to *Mrs Pac-Man* but Mike [Horowitz's] wife, who did not take his last name when they married, jumped in and said it should be *Ms Pac-Man*." By introducing a family dynamic into Pac lore, GCC unwittingly created a whole future narrative for the series. Sequels and spin-offs could now feature various members of the growing Pac clan and GCC themselves produced *Jr Pac-Man* in 1983, which introduced a scrolling maze to the gameplay. Indeed, we may have never known that the game actually began as *Crazy Otto* if it hadn't been for the chance intervention of a *Time* magazine journalist writing a story about the videogame boom. GCC had put a single machine out in an arcade in Framingham, MA, and of all the arcades in all the world, he happened to walk into that one. "The picture they used for Pac-Man was actually Crazy Otto," chuckles Doug. "If you knew the game, you'd be like, 'Woah, Pac-Man has grown legs!' I guess the writer of the article was put to shame by people going, 'You're writing about videogames and you don't even know what Pac-Man looks like?!' We all had a good laugh about it."



» [Arcade] "Hey man, Pac-Man's grown legs.

Demolition Racer: No Exit

A RACING WRECKTACLE

» DREAMCAST » 2000 » PITBULL SYNDICATE

I have defied the destiny of my bloodline. That's a fairly dramatic statement, isn't it? But it's true – before me, the men on both sides of my family were lorry drivers, mechanics, chauffeurs, so I was born to work in the automotive field in some fashion. I grew up being taken to car auctions and watching cars get fixed at the family business, so I'm fascinated with them despite never having actually driven one. One memory from when I was young really stands out, and that's when my dad took me out to see write-off wrecks meet their final end at the banger racing.

Whenever I remember those days out, I inevitably get the urge to play *Demolition Racer: No Exit*. In this rough and ready racer, the aim of the game is to survive three laps of carnage while causing as much damage as possible. You can try to get out in front to maximise your chances of finishing the race, but your finishing position only determines your score multiplier – points are earned by ramming your rivals. It's entirely possible to cross the finish line before any of the other racers, only to end up in ninth place because you weren't aggressive enough.

The Dreamcast is blessed with enough great racing games that *Demolition Racer* was never going to claim pole position, but where the PlayStation version had to compete with the established *Destruction Derby* series, the emphasis on motorised mayhem distinguishes it from the competition on Sega's console. It's not graphically exceptional but the framerate is nice and smooth, and the soundtrack heavily features one of my all-time favourite bands, Fear Factory. The cars could arguably do with a weightier feel but the pile-ups can get pretty spectacular, and there's even a minigame that supports the Dreamcast lightgun, so there's a surprising amount to like about it. It's a shame the Dreamcast version never got a PAL release. ✱

TION

V16

POINTS

0

25

HIT

10

HIT

10

HIT

HIT

113

5

» This month we take Super Woden GP II and Neo Sprint for a spin, go for a kickabout with Sociable Soccer 24, meet the Retro Revengers and take to the skies with Over Horizon X Steel Empire

» [PlayStation 5] This might not look too exciting, but these vehicles are travelling very fast.

Super Woden GP II

AN EPIC OLD-SCHOOL RACER

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT REVIEWED:** PS5
- **ALSO ON:** PS4, PC, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES S/X
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £11.99
- **PUBLISHER:** EASTASIASOFT
- **DEVELOPER:** EASTASIASOFT/VIJUDA
- **PLAYERS:** 1-4

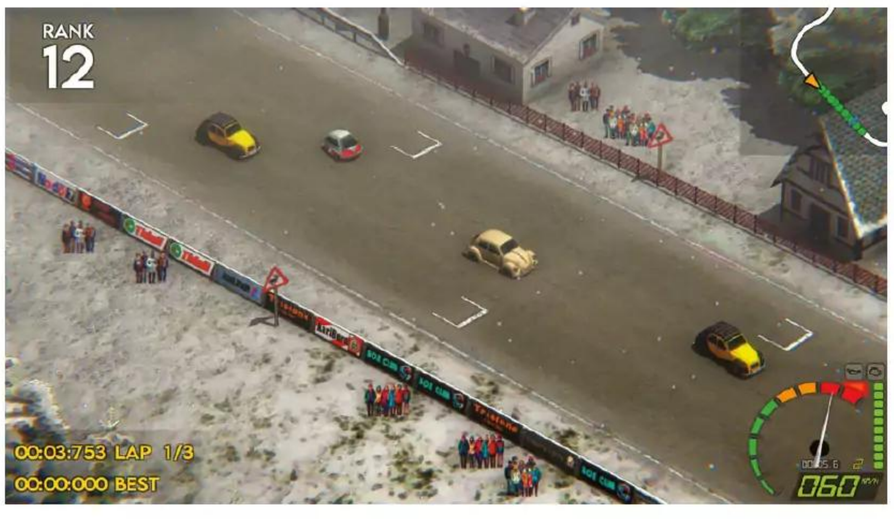
In a world where additional extras are often hidden behind microtransactions and downloadable content it's rather refreshing to find a game that comes loaded with an obscene amount of extras. *Super Woden GP II*'s content is arguably its greatest strength as it offers an exceptional amount of game for its paltry asking price.

Upon starting you'll be presented with a map where you can buy a staggering amount of cars from various fictional dealers, visit your garage, check your stats, tune up your cars and take part in two different game modes, Arcade and Time Trials. Arcade consists of two multicourse routes, complete with a variety of cars to master and some very challenging tracks to navigate. Time Trials is exactly what you'd expect, allowing you to race against ghosts or simply tackle those tricky tracks that are causing you difficulties.

The real meat of *Super Woden GP II*'s content is found under Go Race and it's an impressive array of endless races that cover all manner of themes and vehicles. WGP Championships is the main event consisting of a large number of unlockable races. You've also got an equally expansive Rally mode that will take an equally long time to master. Endurance sees you competing in lengthy laps of more basic-looking tracks, while Weekend is a themed set of events that require you to compete in everything from race cars to vans.

Progress is handled by collecting stars, while completing events in

» [PlayStation 5] If you thought the game was challenging already, wait until you play in snowy and rainy conditions.



BRIEF HISTORY

» The original *Super Woden GP* was released by ViJuDa in 2021 and received plenty of acclaim thanks to its extensive number of cars, numerous tracks and excellent soundtrack. The sequel is now here and builds on the previous game by turning all of its features up to 11.

» [PlayStation 5] It's nice to simply unlock a new vehicle through skill, rather than having to pay additional money for it.

✱PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

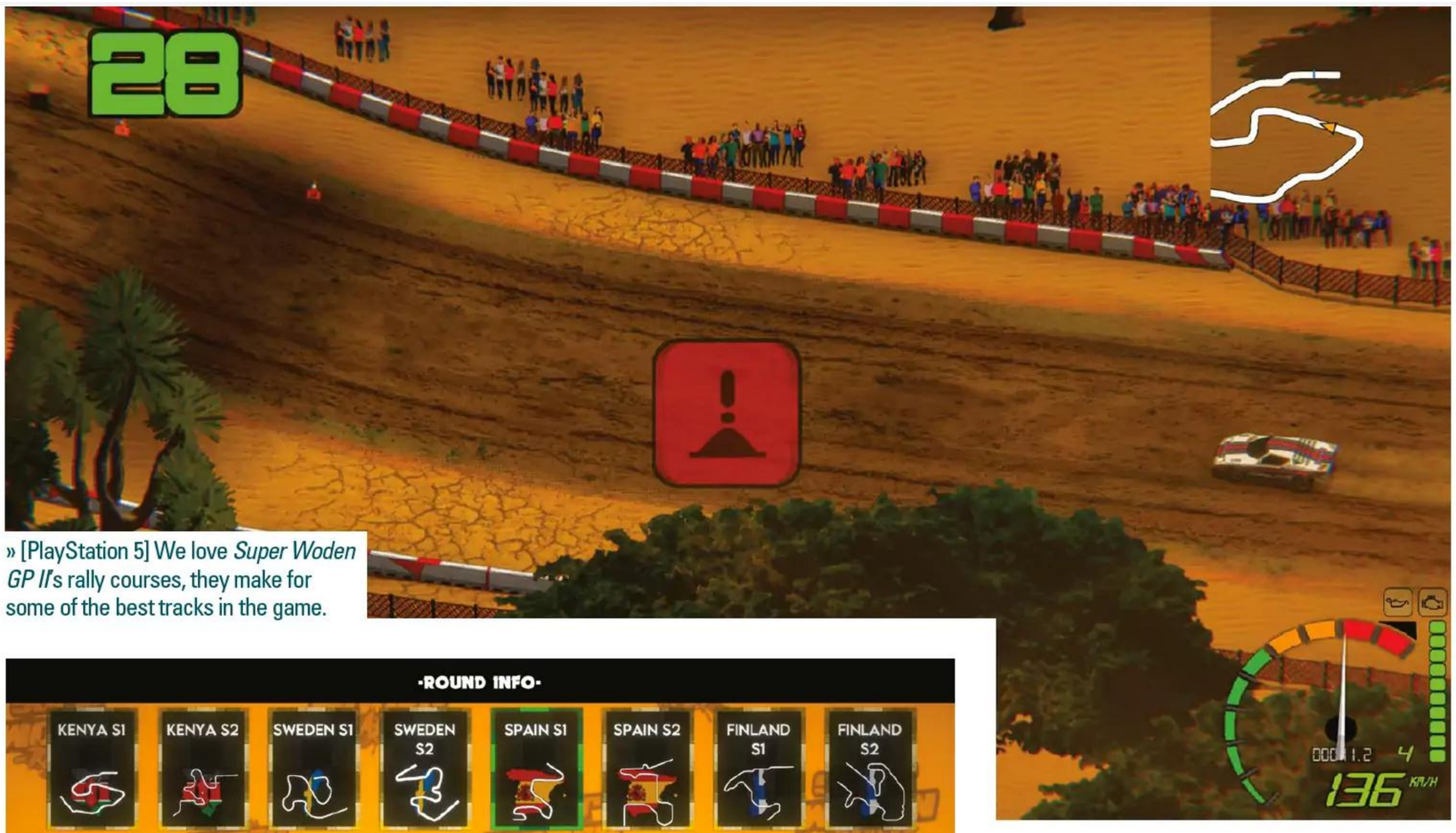
Neo Sprint

While *Super Woden GP II* is the better game, I've enjoyed the sheer accessibility of Atari's enjoyable reboot.

NICK

Retro Revengers

I like that this game knows exactly who it's for and doesn't mess around – straight in at the deep end, here.



» [PlayStation 5] We love *Super Woden GP II*'s rally courses, they make for some of the best tracks in the game.

» [PlayStation 5] Arcade mode has you visiting a number of challenging tracks across the world.

the WGP Championships and Rally modes earns you new vehicles. Generally, the unlocking system is pretty good and there's often a decent amount of tracks available to try if you're finding a certain area of the game too tough to bypass. We did find however that certain sections proved quite difficult and we often had to compete in some races several times in order to unlock the credits needed to buy better cars.

The game's difficulty will be a sticking point for some, because it's not quite as arcade-like as its top-down perspective suggests. Yes it's obvious that the game's developer is pulling inspiration from the likes of *Neo Drift Out* and *World Rally*, but the comprehensiveness of tuning found in games like *Gran Turismo* is also abundant and means that *Super Woden GP II* is far more than a sum of its parts. We found the first hour of the game to be quite frustrating with our cars spinning wildly out of control at the slightest corner, getting jostled too much by rival cars or coming to a quick standstill whenever you veered off the track, but over time you start to understand the nuances of each vehicle and a combination of studying the track and easing into certain corners soon leads to success.

You'll still hit the occasional brick wall of course, but the ability to return to any completed track to replay it and boost your credits means that you are never stuck at a dead end for long. Granted, this focus on grinding won't be for everyone and we'd imagine there will be plenty out there who'll be able to get completely to the end of the game by simply relying on the cars they've unlocked, but it's worth noting ViJuDa's game can be quite unforgiving at times.

Although you won't find any officially licensed cars on offer, many of the most popular brands and models are easily recognisable and you'll be racing around in clones of Minis, Porsches and Citroen 2CVs. They all handle distinctly as well and you'll soon settle into a favourite set of vehicles and be more than content to tune up your favourites.

As entertaining and enjoyable as *Super Woden GP II* is, it's not without its issues. While the aforementioned difficulty and grinding will annoy some, there are additional little presentation niggles that annoy us. It's not immediately clear what vehicles can be used in specific races and you'll need to continually return to the garage to select the correct one. It's also frustrating that finishing a match throws you back to the main map, so if you want to tackle it again you'll need to go back through several screens. Finally, the lack of online multiplayer in this day and age is rather disappointing as well.

None of the above issues stopped us from enjoying *Super Woden GP II* though, and it's a gloriously rich treasure trove of racing content that took us right back to the good old days. If you're looking for a solid racing game with plenty of value it's hard to see how this will disappoint. ✱

✱ CARS, CARS, CARS

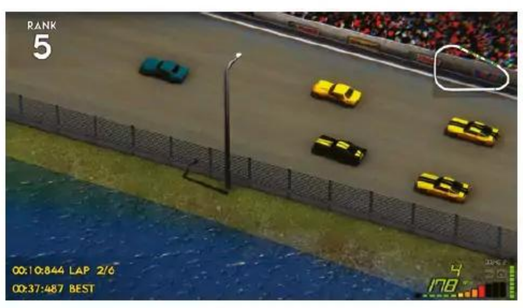
▼ VIJUDA'S SEQUEL HAS THE VEHICLE FOR YOU

While the original *Super Woden GP* allowed you to collect and race in over 70 different cars, the sequel ups this number considerably. There are now over 180 different vehicles to master, from humble bangers to deluxe sports cars and, as you'd expect, they all handle differently to each other. While none of the game's vehicles are actually licensed, it's not hard to work out what real-life vehicles they are based on. Just be mindful that you'll need a lot of credits to unlock them all.

In a nutshell

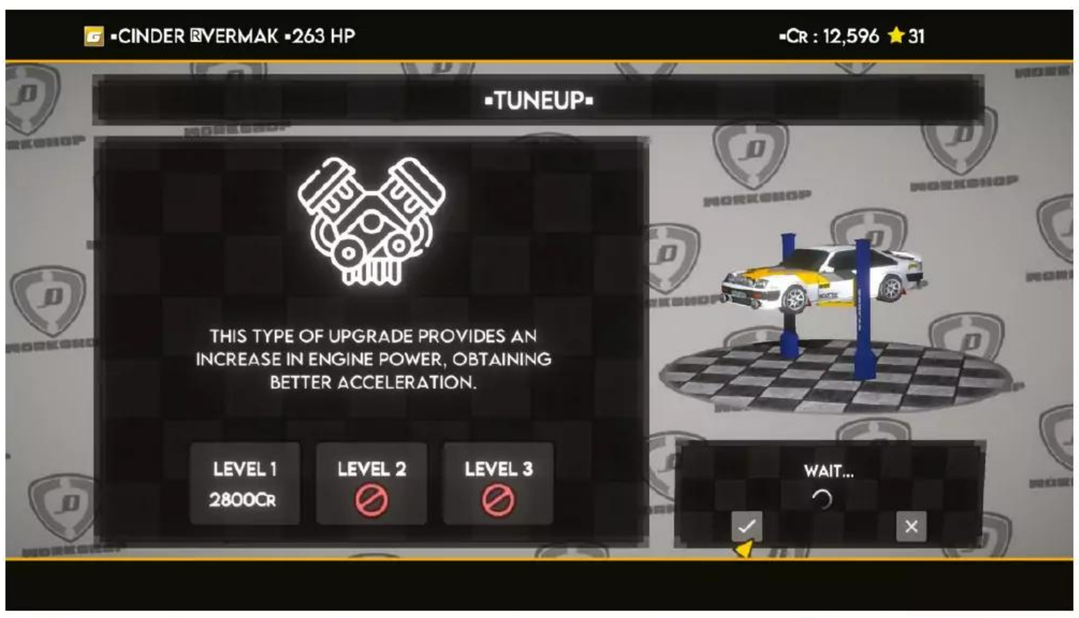
Yes it's challenging, but ViJuDa's game is content rich and offers exceptional value for money for its £11.99 asking price. Do not miss it.

» Score **86%**



» [PlayStation 5] It's sometimes easy to lose track of your car when competing against the same vehicles.

» [PlayStation 5] This is Weekend mode. As you can see, there's a variety of interesting races to compete in.



» [PlayStation 5] If a certain track is causing you difficulties try tuning up your vehicle and recompeting.

★ PICK OF THE MONTH

Retro Revengers

» **System:** PS4 (version tested), PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC » **Buy it for:** £7.99 » **Buy it from:** Online

Ossan and the other Retro Revengers have been sucked into the game world, and they've got to defeat the evil Demon Overlord of Triple A – or DOTA, for short. After one of the characters questions if that name is legal, a joke that's indicative of the game's general sense of humour, you're given a quick tutorial on Ossan's abilities. It's a fair amount to absorb, as he can throw rapid-fire knives, use a charged attack to surround himself with flames, charge another attack to throw that barrier, and holding the jump button allows him to float like Yoshi.

Once you dive into the action, you quickly realise why the developer has taken this approach – the game is tailored for veterans of classic platformers who have seen such abilities before, and from the very first stage, the game adopts a tough but fair approach to difficulty. While it never comes close to the masochistic levels of something like *Celeste*, the first stage certainly doesn't hold back much compared to the last. Each stage requires you to learn a whole new set of abilities with another character, and there are five in total. That isn't many but they're nice and varied, and there's a neat little surprise once you've beaten all five stages that will encourage you to come back, too.

The game looks nice enough in general, with the large boss enemies being a particular visual highlight, but the real treat is the fantastic chiptune soundtrack by Manami Matsumae, best known for her work on the *Mega Man* and *Shovel Knight* soundtracks. It's a great overall package, with the only disappointment being a very easy Trophy list that feels totally at odds with the otherwise robust challenge on offer. Despite that minor quibble, *Retro Revengers* offers quite a lot for a relatively low price and has been a welcome surprise package.

» Score **85%**

» [PlayStation 4] Bosses are designed well – you need a mix of regular and charged attacks here.

» [PlayStation 4] Some characters are more mobile, others like this one have strong offensive capabilities.

Sociable Soccer 24

» **System:** Switch (version tested), PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X
» **Buy it for:** £19.99 » **Buy it from:** Online

If you didn't know this was meant to be a spiritual successor to *Sensible Soccer*, you wouldn't guess from a first glance – not with the default side-on camera, real licensed players and Ultimate Team-style Career Mode. However, while it doesn't have the pace of *Sensi*, the ball pings about between players in a familiar way and that alone makes it a refreshing arcade-style alternative to EA and Konami's football games. It's worth noting that the default difficulty is low enough that we took England to Euros victory on our first attempt, but don't worry about other barriers to progress – thankfully, there's no pay-to-win in the game's card-collecting mode.

NICK THORPE

» Score **79%**

Neo Sprint

» **System:** PS5 (tested), PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X
» **Buy it from:** Online » **Buy it for:** £19.99

If *Super Woden GP II* is the expert option for fans of arcade racers, then Atari's reboot of its classic *Sprint* series will appease everyone else. It's a genuinely great little game, with a distinctive art style and a solid selection of game modes, including a challenging time trial-based Obstacle Course and loads of charming unlockables. Like *Super Woden GP II* it lacks online multiplayer but ups the ante by catering for eight players locally. The jewel of the reboot though is the incredible course designer. This mode offers some excellent longevity and makes it a worthy alternative to ViJuDa's game, even if it is a little more expensive.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **83%**

Over Horizon X Steel Empire

» **System:** Switch (tested), PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X
» **Buy it for:** £13.49 » **Buy it from:** Online

ININ Gems' latest collection offers three shmups: *Over Horizon* and two variants of *Steel Empire*. If you've never played *Over Horizon*, it's an expensive NES blaster with challenging shooting mechanics and a superb Edit Mode. The Mega Drive spiritual sequel *Steel Empire* is an equally enjoyable blaster that shares similar mechanics and features greatly enhanced visuals. Less impressive is the weak GBA update which suffers from a cramped playing area. Every game features the usual quality-of-life improvements like rewind options and slick visual tweaks, while the price point makes this hard to ignore.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **78%**

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THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>

<!--- [GAME BOY] COMPARING THE GAME BOY AND GAME BOY COLOR VERSIONS OF THE CAR SCENE. --->

<!--- ABOVE YOU CAN SEE THE BACKGROUND GRAPHICS OF A NES SCENE BEING ASSEMBLED. --->

<!--- [GAME BOY ADVANCE] CUTSCENES WILL HELP ADVANCE THE STORY. --->

<INTRO> KICKSTARTER HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT WAY FOR HOMEBREW DEVELOPERS TO GET THEIR FINISHED PRODUCT INTO THE HANDS OF THE GAMER. TWO OF THE GAMES FEATURED THIS MONTH HAVE GONE THAT ROUTE – TRIALS OF KHARZOID HAS ALREADY BEEN SUCCESSFULLY FUNDED, WHILE CRONELA'S MANSION IS PREPARING TO LAUNCH WITH PLENTY OF REWARDS AND GREAT-LOOKING BOXED VERSIONS. MEANWHILE, OUR CHAMPION CODER FAVOURS THE BBC MICRO, AND WE HAVE THREE VERY DIFFERENT REVIEWS TO EXPLORE. </INTRO>

<!--- FRANCESCO 'STRAYNUS' TERRACIANO, THE CREATOR OF CRONELA'S MANSION. --->

<!--- A MOCK-UP OF THE SNES PHYSICAL EDITION. --->

<MAIN HEADER>

MADCAP MANSION

<INTRO> FRANCESCO 'STRAYNUS' TERRACIANO IS CREATING CRONELA'S MANSION, A MULTIFORMAT NINTENDO POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE INSPIRED BY A CLASSIC OF THE GENRE </INTRO>

<BODY> **If you're wondering what game inspired Francesco 'Straynus' Terraciano's latest creation, it's a classic Lucasfilm adventure.** "My favourite game is *Maniac Mansion*, the NES version to be more exact," he tells us. "I always wanted to play a similar game on NES again, but it never happened. I started creating videogames so that somewhere in the world someone would have something created by me that would accompany them throughout their lives. If that happened, I would feel fulfilled."

Francesco loved the strange humour of Lucasfilm's game and says it will carry over to his new game. "*Cronela's Mansion* is a videogame with a dark and sad story, but the jokes are guaranteed, we will have more than one laugh at the incredible things that we can see, just as there will be more tense and dramatic moments." This ambitious game will appear on multiple retro Nintendo formats, as well as PC and Switch. "Creating a point-and-click for retro systems has been a real feat, which not only requires a lot of low-level programming knowledge but also a lot of patience and years of hard work, overcoming obstacles every day," explains Francesco.

As you'd expect, different formats require different tools. "The problems come when the scenes are for NES and SNES, as well as Game Boy and GBA," continues Francesco. "There are many colour limitations here and unique pixels. So it is necessary to 'repeat' details to fill a scene. To create 8-bit music you use Famitracker, which is a free Windows tracker – I have had to redo the songs in various formats. For NES, we have created our own engine using 6502 assembler. For the Game Boy versions, we used GBStudio. For modern versions, I have used Unity."

Cronela's Mansion is Francesco's first game, which has presented numerous challenges. "Without a

CRAFTY CLICKS

THE ADVENTURES OF THE BLACK HAWK Steam

<Recommended by Francesco himself, fight for justice as the masked Black Hawk in this Spanish-made adventure set in pre-Revolutionary France. />

CASTLE SHADOWGATE C64

<Genre pioneer ICOM's NES fantasy game makes its way onto the popular 8-bit computer thanks to the hard work of Donnie Russell II. />

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- EDITING SPRITES FOR THE NES VERSION. --->

doubt, the NES-compatible version has been the most difficult," says Francesco. "If I had to say only one thing, I would say the inventory objects – there are too many variables, and this made us sweat a lot. I could have made the game simpler, but I didn't want this; I pushed the NES to the limit, so when I see the result of the game, I think that the time invested has been worth it." There will also be Easter eggs to discover. "They will be quite hidden, but the person who finds them or stumbles upon them will have a great day, especially one of them that will be totally related to *Maniac Mansion*, I think it will be very funny for *Maniac Mansion* fans."

The Kickstarter launches later this year – kck.st/4boTjiC – with boxed physical versions, and Francesco is working very hard. "I'm still thinking about good stretch goals! But one of them would undoubtedly be to create a version compatible with Sega or the C64. If the Kickstarter is quite successful, I'd like a full saga with collector's editions, a saga that continues for many years." </BODY>

<INTRO> MORE POINT-AND-CLICK HOMEBREW GAMES TO DISCOVER </INTRO>

Act natural, we're just two friends going for a walk. We can't afford to stick out.
•It seems you have no at a disavantage, miss...?
•Ba... err... um... oof... ah...

NEONNOIR
Amiga

The short but well-made cyberpunk adventure won the Amiga Blitz Basic Game Jam in 2022. If you like the genre, it's highly recommended. />

BLAKE'S 7
Oric

Defence Force's gorgeous sci-fi adventure based on the TV series has recently been updated, fixing typos and adding a French translation. />

PERFECTLY NORMAL APARTMENT
PICO-8

Created with Liquidream's SCUMM-8 engine, this quirky horror adventure has an option to turn off its bad language. />

MEMORY
ITEM
FILE
ROOMS 14
YOU SEE A STANDARD TOILET AND A SINK. THE MIRROR ABOVE THE SINK IS BROKEN. THE TOWEL NEXT TO THE SHOWERCURTAIN IS STAINED WITH BLOOD AND THERE IS ALSO BLOOD AROUND THE DRAIN.

NEWSBYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

Amstrad CPC: Solve a riddle behind our included link to find part 1 of *The Key*, the English translation of Pakete Soft's point-and-click adventure. Test your skill at bit.ly/thekey-cpc />

BBC Micro: Martin Moxon's *Elite Compendium* brings together all his hacks, including the docking computer and the troublesome Trumbles. Hunt for it at bit.ly/elite-compendium />

C64: For more point-and-click action, check out *Broken Mirror* (top image) by Tommie Hansmar. There's more info at bit.ly/brokenmirror-c64 />

Game Boy: Version 4.0 of GBStudio has been released at bit.ly/gbstudio4 and there's a great guide to GBDK-developed games at bit.ly/gbdk-showcase />

Jaguar: Lawrence Staveley of Reboot Games converted Haplo's *Tenebra* and *Tenebra 2*. You'll find them both at h4plo.itch.io />

Oric: Defence Force has updated its itch page with multiple releases, including *Oricium*, *Impossible Mission* and *Stormlord* from Jonathan Bristow. Find them all at defenceforce.itch.io />

PICO-8: Carve wooden replicas of different shapes in the brilliant *Woodworm*. Get carving at bit.ly/woodworm-p8 You can also find top-rated PICO-8 games thanks to Nerdy Teachers' curated list, which is at bit.ly/curated-p8 />

PLUS/4: Another incredible conversion from TCFS, Unreal and Csabo arrives in the form of *Prince Of Persia*. Play it online at bit.ly/persia-plus4 />

VIC-20: In an alternate timeline, all cars on the road are Teslas and Elon has become a frog. You can enjoy Aleksei Eben's *Tesla Frogger* by hopping over to bit.ly/tesla-frogger />

ZX Spectrum: Bearsden Primary School pupils have again used their creativity to develop 14 new Spectrum games with AGD. Investigate them at bit.ly/bearsden2024 />

ZX81: Check out Adrian Pilkington's recent 16K games, including *Maze*, *Jump*, *Scroll Zone*, and *Pirate Invaders*. You'll find them at adrianpilko.itch.io />

CHAMPION CODER

CHRIS 'CHRISB' BRADBURNE

<INTRO> CHRIS TELLS US ABOUT HIS IMPRESSIVE BBC MICRO GHOSTBUSTERS CONVERSION, REVIEWED IN ISSUE 261 </INTRO>

<INFO LOCATION: GODALMING, UK WEBSITE: BIT.LY/CHRISB-BBC , BIT.LY/GHOSTBUSTERS-BBCB FORMAT: BBC MICRO (B/B+/MASTER) PREVIOUS GAMES: CASTLE DEFENDER, NIGHT NINJA, ACORN ISLAND, UNTITLED DUNGEON GAME CURRENTLY WORKING ON: VOXEL DEMO (BBC) />

<!--- CHRIS FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE BBC AT AGE 10 AND WENT BACK TO PROGRAMMING IT IN 2015. --->

WHAT IS YOUR DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT LIKE, CHRIS?

My general workflow uses BeebEm – or B2 and B-Em, depending on what I'm trying to do. For code editing, I use VSCode with the Beeb VSC extension. For assembly, the Beebasm assembler. There are lots of great tools that the Beeb community have produced – BeebSpriter for sprite editing and the BBC micro image converter for converting to the Beeb's screen format.

WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE TO REMAKE GHOSTBUSTERS?

Because Dave_E asked on the Stardot forums! He'd drawn up some example screens in Mode 1 (320x256x4 colours) and the only one that I've used is the title screen. I do remember a tinge of envy that it wasn't available for the machine I had.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE?

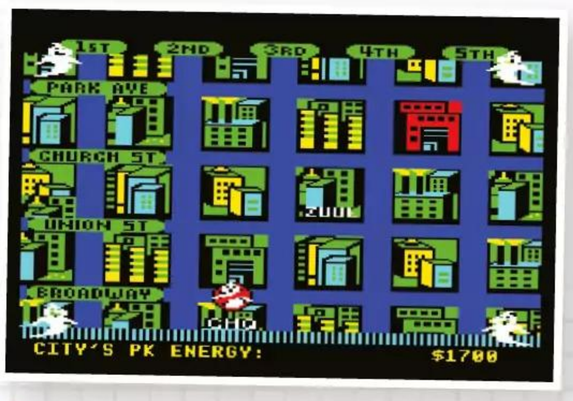
I didn't have access to any source code, and I didn't get on with disassembling another version; I had to imply the gameplay based on playing other versions. The music was one of the easier parts. There are various versions of the *Ghostbusters* theme on PD discs. I took one I thought sounded the best and converted the player to assembler.

WHAT ABOUT THE GAME'S VISUALS?

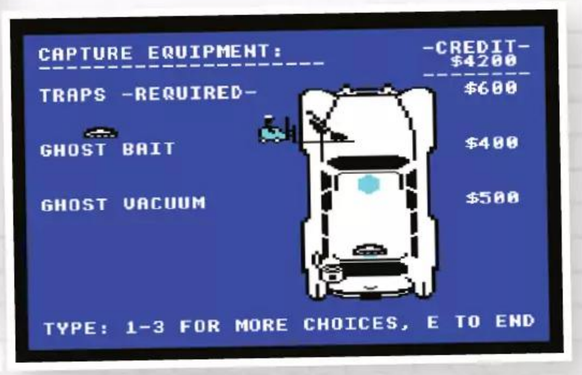
The graphics were harder. For the houses, I got samples of each of the different house types from the C64 game and then wrote some code to go through the screens and identify the unique tiles for each house. I then have routines to draw these tiles which can be flipped or recoloured as needed. The finale screens are compressed as a single block with the lz02 compressor. A similar trick is used for the cars on the driving screens. The house drawing decompresses the tile data into an unused area of the screen and then uses these tiles to draw the house.

HOW DID YOU TACKLE THE GAME'S FAMOUS SPEECH?

The sampled sound was a resample of a recording of the C64 version. The in-game samples are not quite as good quality as they could be, as I wanted to only use one Sideways RAM bank. />



<!--- [BBC B] PAYING ATTENTION TO THE MAP HELPS YOU DEAL WITH GHOST ALERTS. --->



<!--- [BBC B] YOU CAN EQUIP YOUR ECTOMOBILE OF CHOICE BY LOADING ITEMS WITH THE FORKLIFT. --->

DATABURST

TONY: MONTEZUMA'S GOLD

retro GAMER SIZZLER

<INFO FORMAT: ATARI 8-BIT, C64, AMIGA – DIGITAL & PHYSICAL EDITIONS AVAILABLE CREDITS: MONOCHROME PRODUCTIONS PRICE: $9.99 DIGITAL DOWNLOAD / PHYSICAL VERSION VARIES WEB: BIT.LY/TONY-MONTEZUMA />

<BODY> **Monochrome Productions' latest game is inspired by Polish documentary maker Tony Halik.** Split into massive levels, Tony explores Montezuma's Castle by finding keys and masks to unlock the castle's many barriers. Colliding with fire, spikes, or wildlife (bats, snakes, scorpions) will cost a life, unless Tony has grabbed a life-saving potion. Just be mindful he can only carry four objects at a time.

The potions Tony can grab make getting around easier and screens also have safe spots you can stand in to watch the movement patterns. In terms of difficulty, the Amiga is slightly harder with extra hazards and enemies in certain places, but the overall level layouts are similar and enjoyable to explore. The 1-bit graphics across all formats are wonderfully done, with plenty of detail in the animation and backgrounds. The clever filters giving different colours and contrast settings are a nice touch as well, while the C64 version has a built-in cheat menu. Some excellent music, including a contribution from Adam Gilmore, adds to the atmosphere. Physical editions have been selling fast – a second batch of C64 cartridges and the 5.25-inch disk version, along with the Amiga 3.5-inch disks, are available from ka-plus.pl while the Atari game (on cartridge or pen drive) is at retronics.eu This a truly memorable platform game that plays as good as it looks. </BODY>

SCORE: 90%

<!--- [C64] THE GREEN SCREEN FILTER OF THE C64 VERSION. --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<!--- [AMIGA] THE GLOWING RED LAVA WALLS ARE FATAL TO THE TOUCH. --->

<!--- [AMIGA] THE MINERS SAY THANK YOU WHEN YOU RESCUE THEM. --->

AMI-HERO

<INFO FORMAT: AMIGA (MINIMUM A500 WITH 0.5MB CHIP RAM/0.5MB SLOW RAM) CREDITS: TUKINEM
PRICE: V1.0 FREE, V1.1 (WITH GRAPHIC UPDATE & FIXES) $4.99 OR MORE / FLOPPY DISK VERSION £12.61 PLUS POSTAGE (K & A PLUS) WEB: BIT.LY/AMIHERO / KA-PLUS.PL />

<BODY> **The John van Ryzin classic (*Helicopter Emergency Rescue Operation*) has been updated for the Amiga, with version 1.0 free and the graphically enhanced v1.1 requiring payment.** As Roderick Hero, use your helicopter backpack to fly into the mines and rescue the miners. Drop dynamite to blow up walls blocking your way (you have limited stock for each level) and use your laser to shoot the bad guys. Contact with lamps turns the area dark, while later levels add lava walls and water (with a helpful raft) before the final confrontation. Graphically, v1.1 does a good job, while the moody background tune and sampled Thank You add to the atmosphere. This is a competent conversion but doesn't add anything new in gameplay terms. </BODY>

SCORE: 75%

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] AN ALIEN ABDUCTION IS IN PROGRESS, SO SHOOT THE SAUCER BEFORE THE HUMAN IS LOST. --->

<!--- [ZX SPECTRUM] YOU CAN ONLY CARRY ONE PASSENGER AT A TIME (SHOWN TOP RIGHT) SO THESE PEOPLE MUST WAIT. --->

FLOOD

<INFO FORMAT: ZX SPECTRUM (48K, SUPPORTS CURRAH SPEECH) CREDITS: JONATHAN CAULDWELL
PRICE: FREE WEB: BIT.LY/FLOOD-ZX />

<BODY> **Aliens destroyed the local reservoir, leaving the townspeople stranded on rooftops – and now flying saucers are abducting them!** Your helicopter can shoot down the saucers or carry one passenger at a time back to your ship – you cannot shoot while carrying a passenger and colliding with the saucers will cost a life. The *Choplifter*-style premise is good fun; the speech helpfully shouts Help when someone is being abducted. You may only keep playing to gain a high score, but Jonathan's first Spectrum game since 2017 is great fun while it lasts. </BODY>

SCORE: 71%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> PASCAL BELISLE COMBINED ARKANOID WITH AN RPG TO CREATE HIS NES GAME, THE TRIAL OF KHARZOID </INTRO>

<BODY> **The latest game from Pascal Belisle takes its ideas from numerous classic games.** "I was inspired by *Arkanoid*, *Castlevania* and *Zelda*, but also lesser-known games like *Pinball Quest* and *Kirby's Block Ball*, where I got the idea of using more than one paddle," Pascal tells us.

What is *The Trail Of Kharzoid* about though? "Kharzoid is an evil necromancer who made a game filled with traps and foes," explains Pascal. "The hero sacrifices himself by being put into this trial, risking his soul." Playing as a skull did pose some challenges for Pascal. "He cannot carry a large inventory around, so where will he put that stuff?" poses Pascal. "There are no stats like strength, intelligence, or the like, but I will try to give the player a sense of progression in other ways." That progression comes in the form of typical RPG tropes. "You will meet a lot of other characters," continues Pascal. "Some will help you, and some will annoy you! Some will give you sidequests. I have to keep myself from going off in all directions; it's a brick-breaking game after all!" If Pacal's game is of interest, late pledges can still be made at kck.st/3VUnbik </BODY>

<!--- [NES] YOU NEED TO USE TWO PADDLES TO HELP GRAKK, BY BANISHING THE PESKY CROW. --->

ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

The team reminisces about a cultural icon

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

Few gaming platforms are truly unavoidable, but if you're a UK resident of a certain age, the ZX Spectrum was just that – the ***Retro Gamer*** crew had other 8-bit computers at home, but Sinclair's platform became a feature of our gaming lives regardless. With The Spectrum on the horizon, we decided to look back at the computer that defined an era.

NICK

So none of us were Spectrum owners back in the day, but was there anywhere that you regularly played the machine?

DARRAN

I had two friends with Spectrums, Paul Elkins and Richard Talboys. Richard actually lived across the road from our school so we'd often go to his house at lunchtime or after school to play on it. Fun times. Our next door neighbours also had a Spectrum and the mum and dad were addicted to it. I used to love finishing school and finding my mum out, as I could go next door to play on it.

> "There's nothing wrong with playing an awful lot of Dizzy"
> DARRAN JONES

TIM

Not regularly no, but some family friends had one on which I played a few games of *Hungry Horace*. They lived halfway across the province so we didn't visit that many times.

NICK

I didn't know anyone that had one themselves, but the local council ran a play scheme during school holidays, and our nearest one had a ZX Spectrum +2 and an Amiga so that was where I got the bulk of my experience with the computer.

DARRAN

I win, I knew the most people with Spectrums! So what was everyone's favourite developer and why was it Ultimate?

NICK

I don't think we had any Ultimate games in the play barn, so I'd have to say the Oliver twins since I played an awful lot of *Dizzy*.

DARRAN

There's nothing wrong with playing an awful lot of *Dizzy*.

YOUR SINCLAIR
GREMLIN'S H.A.T.E.
IT'S WELL WICKED!
"I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole!" Is this what software houses really think of the Sinclair PC 200?
FULL PRICE GAME!!
ALIEN EVOLUTION
LORD OF THE DUEL
TWO PLAYABLE DEMOS!
HUMAN KILLING MACHINE, LAST DUEL, LED STORM, A QUESTION OF SPORT, CAPTAIN BLOOD, XENON, BLASTEROIDS, PLUS! FOUR MEGAGAMES FOR UNDER A TENNER!

» *Your Sinclair* is one of those mags like *Super Play*, that made you envy owners of other hardware.

TIM

Has to be Beam Software for me, since it developed *Hungry Horace*, which I'm thinking is actually the only Spectrum game I've played. We had a Commodore 64, so Spectrum games looked like such a downgrade to me.

DARRAN

Beam Software is a good choice, it did some great Spectrum games like *The Hobbit* and *The Way Of The Exploding Fist*.

TIM

Both were better on the Commodore 64!

DARRAN

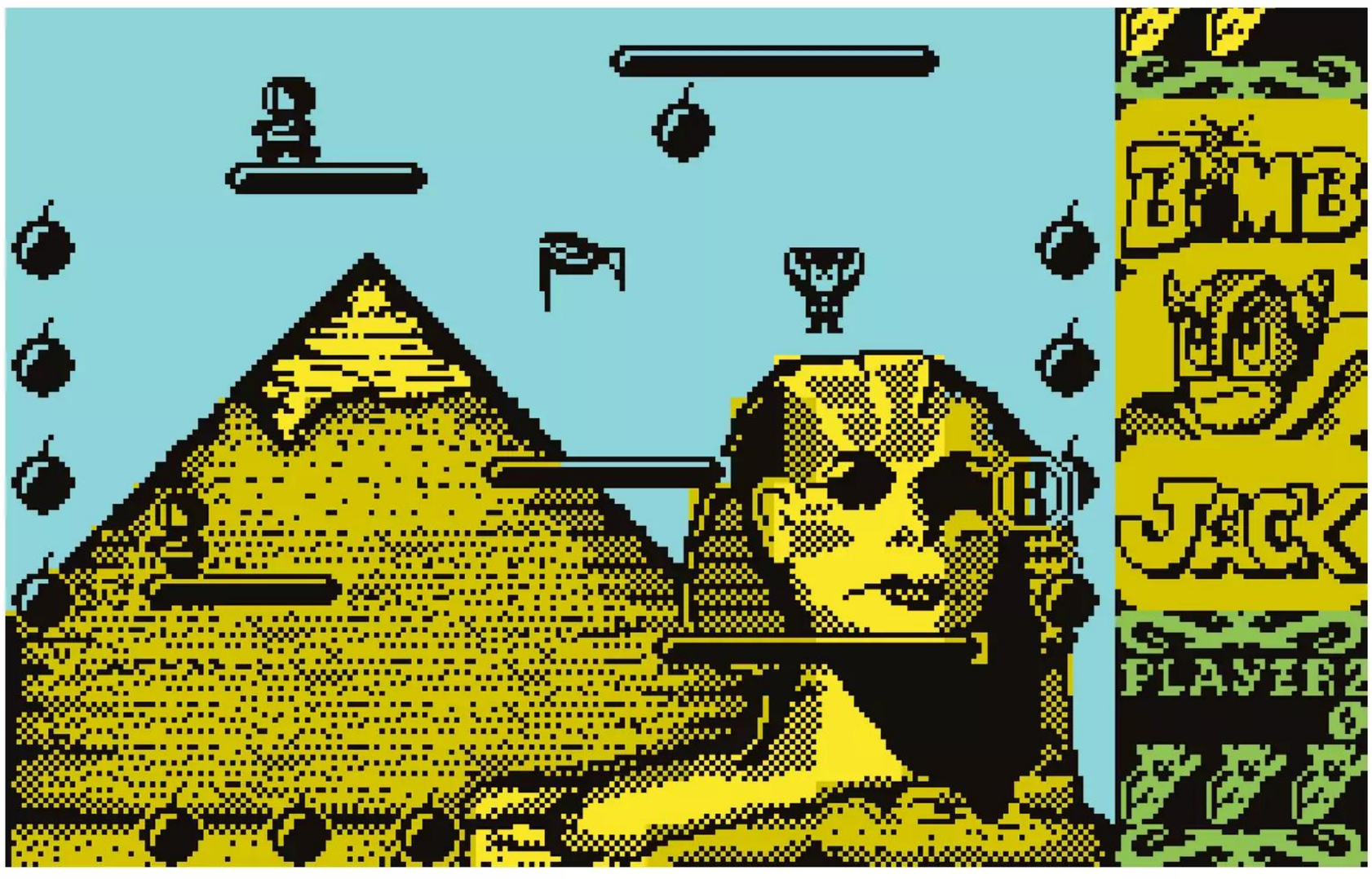
I wondered how long it would take you to slip that in, Tim.

NICK

I mean, I felt like the Spectrum was a graphical downgrade too, but then I came to it backwards – by the time I first played one, the Mega Drive was already out. I didn't even touch an original model until secondary school, when I disassembled one with a friend in technology class. How do we all feel about those rubber keys, anyway?

DARRAN

I rarely did type-ins and used



» [ZX Spectrum] *Bomb Jack* is an arcade conversion that many Spectrum gamers swear by.

a joystick whenever possible, so the rubber keys never really bothered me when I had to use them. I'm pretty sure most of the models that people had were the later models anyway.

TIM

Oh hang on, I'm getting this vague memory of playing something on a ZX Spectrum at the Armagh Observatory And Planetarium. Can't remember what it was, but I do remember the rubber keys – or mostly the lack of them because punk kids had ripped a load of them off. They wouldn't have done that to a Commodore 64.

DARRAN

That must have been a nightmare to use. Does anyone have any favourite arcade conversions? I thought *Chase HQ* was pretty incredible and I used to love playing *Bomb Jack*.

NICK

Chase HQ is brilliant, yeah. I mentioned *Midnight Resistance* on the Editorial page, but I had to seriously give that some thought because *Rainbow Islands* and *R-Type* are both so good too.

DARRAN

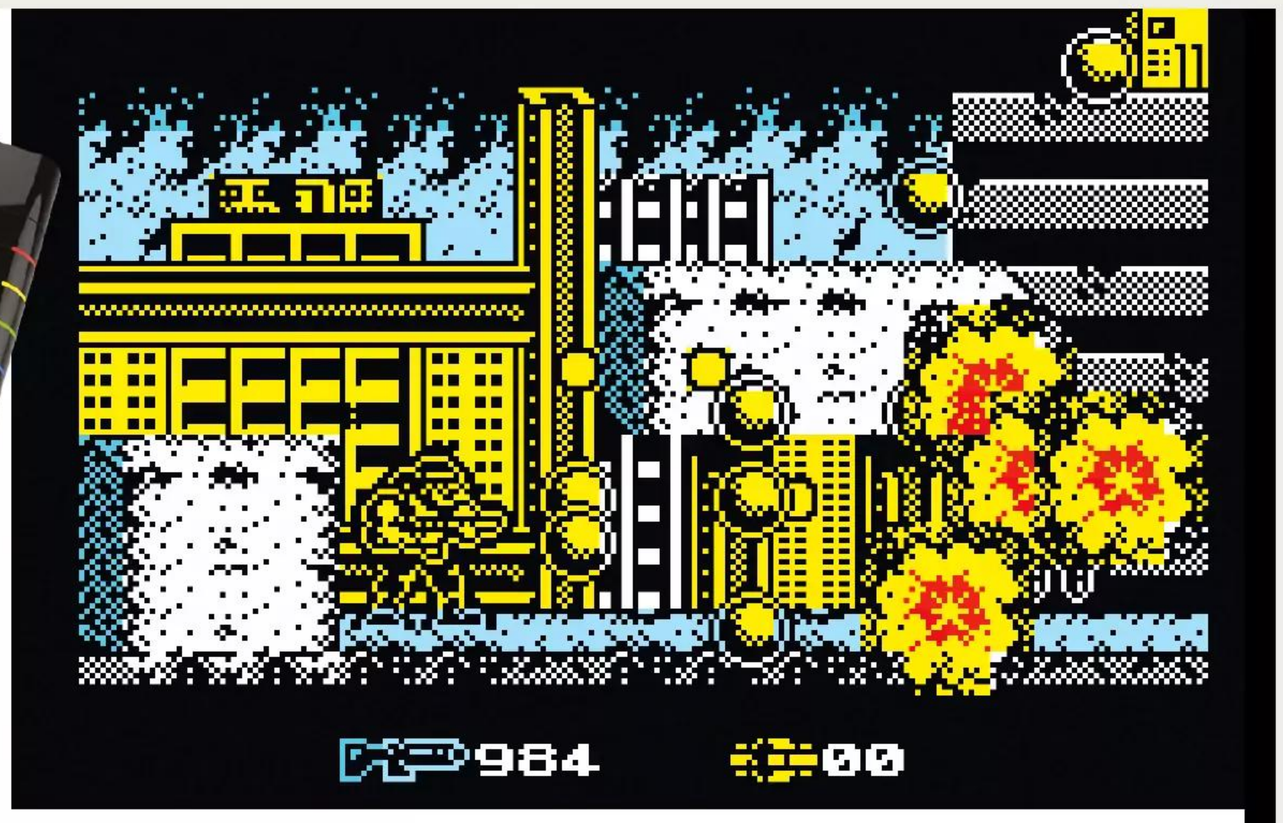
Damn, *R-Type* is astonishing on the Speccy. Good call, Nick. Do you have any favourites, Tim?

TIM

No, of course not. I mean I was going to say *Marble Madness*, but there's undoubtedly better versions of it on other home computers starting with 'C'.

DARRAN

But Amstrad starts with A, Tim.



» [ZX Spectrum] *Midnight Resistance* had a pretty good set of AY tunes for 128K players.

NICK

I mean, you're outnumbered two to one here Darran, but I'd feel bad pushing that advantage. I think the thing I love most about the Speccy is actually the magazines, which I obviously read years after they were new. I loved the sense of humour in *Your Sinclair*, and *Crash* is a legendary mag in its own right.

TIM

It's no *Commodore User*…

DARRAN

Yup, there's no denying that both of them were great mags. I used to get *Amstrad Action* but it was nowhere near as funny as *Your Sinclair*.

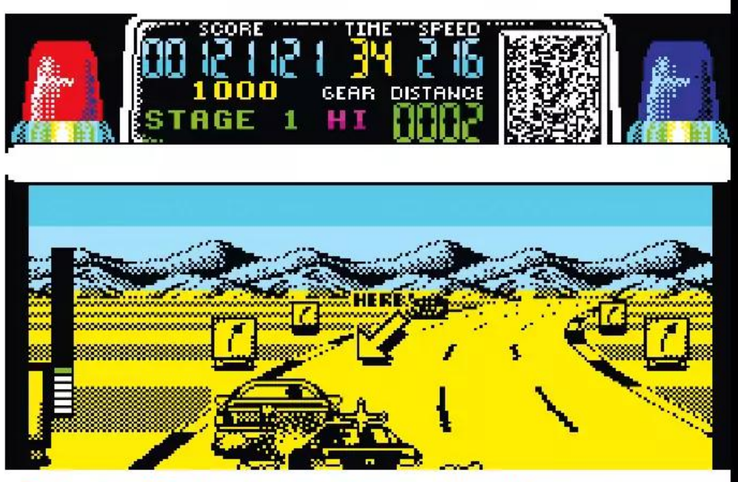
NICK

It does say a lot about the Spectrum that not only is *Crash* back in print, but you have all of these hardware projects like the Spectrum Next, the ZX Touch and now The Spectrum. People really do love that machine.

DARRAN

Yup, and it's hard to blame them when you see some of the excellent homebrew titles that are still being released. We've never had it so good. ✱

» [ZX Spectrum] *Hungry Horace* seems to have constituted most of Tim's Spectrum experience.



» [ZX Spectrum] There's no denying just how good *Chase HQ* was on a system decidedly not designed for it.

» [ZX Spectrum] Weirdly, Nick played a lot of *Video Poker*, as he recalled way back in issue 130.

READERS REACT

What Spectrum arcade conversions do you still enjoy playing?

Speccy Nostalgia

R-Type is simply incredible on the Speccy and *Chase HQ* on my +3 was like having the arcade machine at home, but my favourite will always be *Renegade* as it looks and plays better than its arcade big brother.

Oli Gee

I tend to judge a good arcade conversion on how many ten pences it saved me. *Flying Shark* and *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* both proved to be successful investments from that perspective.

isofarro

Elevator Action by Quicksilva. Captures the atmosphere of the original coin-op perfectly, the continuous theme tune, in 128K mode, is spot on. It's a hidden gem of an arcade conversion from Binary Design.

Bill Mitsis

Green Beret and *Mikie*. Joffa Smith (RIP) made his magic, the Speccy versions were so playable, fun and full of personality! I preferred them to the arcade originals actually.

me

Bomb Jack was great. Really fast paced and accurately reflected the arcade original. One of the best on Spectrum.

Jason Edmunds

Enduro Racer was pretty darn good for its time.

Toni Gálvez – Batman Group

Rainbow Islands is really a great conversion for the Spectrum, *Bubble Bobble* is right after, but still a good conversion.

James Powell

First ones that came to mind for me were *Renegade* (can't include *Target: Renegade* as that was an original game) and *Operation Wolf/Thunderbolt*. I still recall getting the 60-second demo on cassette on the cover of I believe *Sinclair User* and being blown away at how good it played. Great graphics and smooth as a button.

Nathan

WEC Le Mans. Excellent conversion, and the first game to make me realise just how quick the humble Speccy could shunt pixels about the screen.

Bens Jammin

Controversial take but I'd say *Street Fighter II*. It may not play great, but it's significantly better than the C64 and Amiga versions, and was a visual masterpiece for the hardware.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE

"It's not a rare or expensive game but I got to meet Charlotte McBurney who voiced Amicia and she has signed the cover."

AMOUNT PAID: £3

NINTENDO STICKER ALBUM

"This was mine that I completed as a child. I cannot imagine there are many still intact this many years on."

AMOUNT PAID: LOTS OF POCKET MONEY

CLOUD STRIFE STATUE

"It's one of the main scenes I loved in the original and every time I look at it I smile."

AMOUNT PAID: £200

ACTION 52

"I got this as a bundle with around 15 games at a car boot sale. I paid £20 for the box and this was at the bottom! It's the only unboxed NES game I own."

AMOUNT PAID: £20

BIO

NAME:
Adam Bickell

LOCATION:
Manchester

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
£70,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
NES and Xbox

FAVOURITE GAME:
The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past

X MARKS THE SPOT

Our latest collector has a thing for Xbox games and RPGs

A chance discovery 11 years ago led to Adam Bickell's current collection of over 3,000 games. "It started with my parents clearing out the loft and finding my original NES, SNES and Game Boy," he tells us. "I then started picking up the odd game at car boot sales and it spiralled from there!"

That spiralling has led to an excellent selection of games and a particular focus on Microsoft's first Xbox. "I fell in love with the Xbox for its online play back when *Halo 2* came out," Adam tells us. "I was lucky that my now wife bought me the crystal version which now sits proudly front and centre. The games library has some of the best and most replayable games," he continues. "I personally love the *Mech Assault* games, *Metal Arms*, *Jade Empire*, *Project Zero* and the *Star Wars* games (please let them remake *Knights Of The Old Republic*)." Even though we're told Adam has "ninety percent of the retro I could ever have wanted", that's not to say he's still not looking for the odd system to collect. "I still don't own a Sega Saturn so this and a small library of the better games is on my current hit list," we're told.

We'd imagine another thing that Adam regularly looks out for are RPGs, as he has a large collection of them. "Being a dad of two young children and working full time doesn't give me a great deal of time to play," he explains. "Playing an RPG lets me enjoy the amazing stories and also play with my eldest (who is seven) as neither of us mind watching. The visuals of the more modern games help a lot with this."

Another thing that couldn't escape our attention was the large number of models and statues Adam has assembled and while a few have been quite pricey, many have been purchased cheaply. "I have picked up many supercheap on Facebook Marketplace or at car boots," we're told. "I've not gone out actively looking for them although I would like the *Doom* Revenant one if I can find it for £20 or so. The only statue that would be hard now is the Samus First 4 Figures limited edition. She's huge and it's a beautiful statue and one of the only times I've actually splurged on price!"

So what advice would Adam give to any new collectors, whether their focus is on videogames or gaming statues? "Just focus on what you love and the games you'll actually play," he offers. "I have some very rare and expensive games (a lot of Limited Run and Super Rare) but all have been opened and played with. Also don't overpay. Patience is really the only way I have been able to accumulate such a collection as I've come across games at car boots, Marketplace and charity shops." ✱

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

DOOM: THY FLESH CONSUMED & SIGIL

■ "I was lucky enough to meet John Romero and he was genuinely surprised to see me pull this out of my bag to sign. I then bought *SIGIL*, ripped off the plastic and got him to sign that as well."

PAID: £30

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

THE SPECTRUM

If you like the look of The Spectrum, you'll be pleased to know you can preorder it now for **£89.99,** with the controller costing an additional **£19.99.**

TRIVIAL PURSUIT

It might have been pricey on release, but that's no longer the case now. You shouldn't have to pay more than **£3** for a Spectrum copy of ODE's popular quiz game.

STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

You won't need a Rancor-sized wallet to buy this Atari 2600 gem as loose PAL carts can be had for around **£15.** It typically tops out complete for just over **£40.**

TARGET: RENEGADE

Whether you go for the original release or the Hit Squad re-release, the Spectrum variant of this ace brawler should never cost more than **£10.**

MICKEY MANIA

Fancy witnessing Jon Burton's mastery of the Mega Drive first-hand? You'll be pleased to hear that **£20** will net you a complete PAL copy of the challenging platformer.

SNATCHER

As mentioned in our Ultimate Guide, *Snatcher* is one pricey game. Regardless of whether you go for the PAL or USA release, you'll be doing extremely well if you can get it complete for under **£500.** The Japanese version is much cheaper but is extremely text heavy, so keep that in mind if you decide to snatch a copy.

ROCK BAND UNPLUGGED

This excellent collaboration between Harmonix and Backbone Entertainment is still priced reasonably, so it's definitely worth seeking out. You'll be able to get a complete copy for less than **£15.**

FACTORY PANIC

If you're fine with just owning a loose cartridge, *Factory Panic* can be yours for a bargain price of **£10.** However, if you want to own a complete version of Japan System House's puzzle game you'll be paying a little more for the privilege. **£30** to be exact.

HOW MUCH?!

NINTENDO 64: BANJO-KAZOOIE EDITION

We've always known that Rare's lovable pair were popular, but this recent auction still surprised us. Eleven bidders were all after the coveted system, but only one could win. The final bid? An astonishing **£1,100.**

Prices correct at time of print

MY RETRO LIFE

PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT OUR **SHARED PASSION**

VIRTUA VIRTUOSO

Nick shares his love for Sega's top 3D fighting series

The time? 1994, or thereabouts. The place? A seaside arcade, in a town I've long forgotten. The game? *Virtua Fighter.* Everything surrounding my first encounter with that game may have been lost to the mists of time, but the impression it made on me is truly unforgettable. The flat-shaded fighters didn't move like videogame characters, they moved like *people*, and their fights felt far closer to my experiences in the karate dojo than *Street Fighter II* or *Mortal Kombat* because they didn't do any fireballs or crazy flying moves. I dropped in a coin, I picked Akira and I promptly got trounced, partially because I was about seven and partially because Akira is never an easy character to use. The whole experience should have put me off, but instead it was the start of an obsession.

It's no exaggeration to say that the series was the lens through which I viewed new gaming technology. *Virtua Fighter 2*'s texture-mapped visuals were a huge upgrade in the arcade, and *Mean Machines Sega* told me that the Saturn conversion was worth all of the envy it inspired. *Virtua Fighter 3* was the first game that convinced me that graphics would never get better, and made me enthusiastic about getting a Dreamcast, while *Virtua Fighter 4* was one of the games that convinced me to grudgingly accept Sony's PS2 into my life. I was there on the day *Virtua Fighter 5* was installed in Funland at the Trocadero, and while PS3 owners may have got it first, online play made waiting for the Xbox 360 version worthwhile.

That would all be fine, but then there are the more questionable choices I've made. Between various regional releases on different platforms and the *Remix* version, I own the original *Virtua Fighter* seven times over. *Virtua Fighter 2* on the Saturn is a no-brainer, but adding *Virtua Fighter 2* for the Mega Drive suggests I actually have no brain. Do I really need to own *Virtua Fighter Kids GG Portrait Akira*, a Game Gear cartridge which consists primarily of rendered images and has barely enough interactivity to qualify as a game? Almost certainly not, and yet I do.

I know mine isn't the most fashionable of preferences, at least not outside of Japan. One of the criticisms of *Virtua Fighter* that I often hear is that there isn't much to the characters, and Sega only has itself to blame for that – while a dedicated fan might know that Aoi was Akira's childhood friend and detests Brad's attitude, for example, there's very little in the actual games that would let anybody know any of that detail. Weirdly, the only game in the entire series to include character-specific endings is *Virtua Fighter Kids*. But it's the desire to know more about the fighters that has driven me to pick up Japanese guide books, the one-off Marvel comic and even the anime series – on both DVD and Blu-Ray, mind.

> "The flat-shaded fighters didn't move like videogame characters, they moved like people"
> **NICK THORPE**

There's another criticism which is often repeated, that *Virtua Fighter* is simply too complex for its own good, and unfriendly to beginners. To this, I say poppycock. While there is undeniably huge depth to the games and plenty of scope to get really, really good at them, I'd actually suggest the series as an antidote for anyone who thinks fighting games have become impenetrable over the years. *Virtua Fighter 5: Ultimate Showdown*, the most recent release in the series, still uses just a joystick and three buttons and doesn't have so much as a super move gauge to complicate things. If you're totally new to 3D fighting games, it's worth noting that *Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution* has a particularly good tutorial in it.

Right now, the series is in a weird limbo state after Sega took a chance on reviving it by bringing *Virtua Fighter 5: Ultimate Showdown* to PS4 in 2021. The response exceeded Sega's expectations, but no matter how great *Virtua Fighter 5* still is, it's going to take more than an update to a 2006 game to grab the attention of fighting fans. I'd like to imagine a grand return is in the works, one which will follow the leading lights of the genre in integrating plenty of story content and a substantial single-player offering to introduce new players. As great as *Tekken 8* is, it currently stands alone in the 3D fighting field and even its executive game director Katsuhiro Harada has called for a *Virtua Fighter 6* to bring some competition to the scene. For now, all we can do is live in hope. ✱

FEARED FOES

THE VIRTUA FIGHTER CHARACTERS I NEVER LOOK FORWARD TO FACING

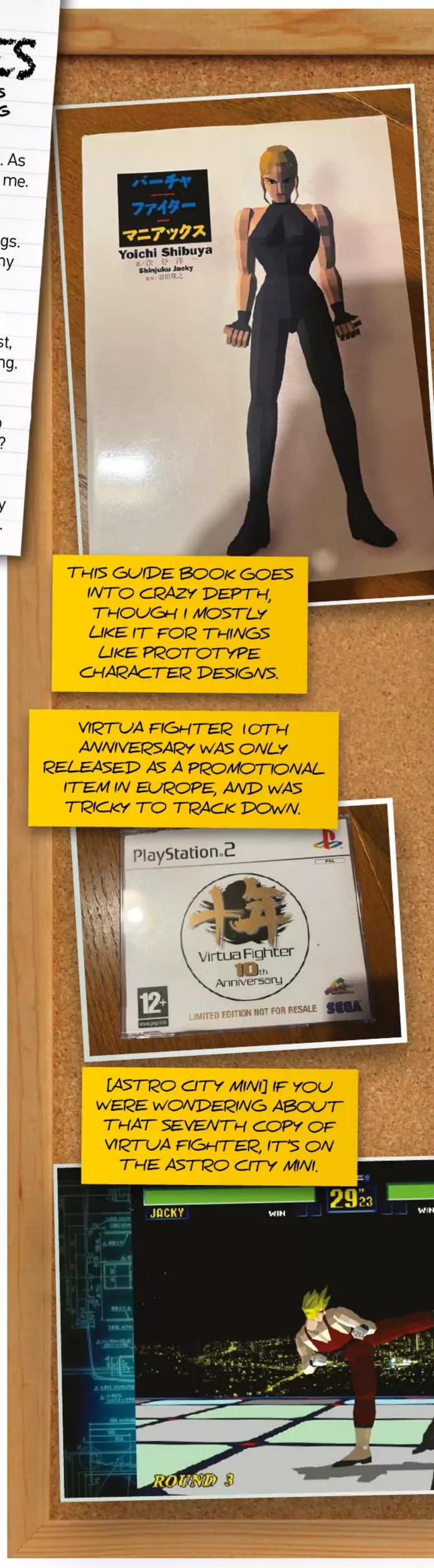
SHUN DI
As a character, I love him for his drunken antics. As an opponent, his oddball fighting style perplexes me.

JACKY BRYANT
It's widely known that Jacky players are scumbags. Unfortunately, I can't judge them because he's my main character too.

BRAD BURNS
It's not that he's particularly difficult to fight against, but that attitude ensures that losing feels humiliating.

LAU CHAN
Crouching for the last hit of Lau's triple punch into kick combo is basic stuff, but how often do I forget?

LION RAFALE
A nightmare. Irritatingly smug voice clips, with tricky moves ensuring you'll hear his win quotes too often.


バーチャ
ファイター
マニアックス
Yoichi Shibuya
Shinjuku Jacky
THIS GUIDE BOOK GOES INTO CRAZY DEPTH, THOUGH I MOSTLY LIKE IT FOR THINGS LIKE PROTOTYPE CHARACTER DESIGNS.
VIRTUA FIGHTER 10TH ANNIVERSARY WAS ONLY RELEASED AS A PROMOTIONAL ITEM IN EUROPE, AND WAS TRICKY TO TRACK DOWN.
PlayStation.2
Virtua Fighter
10th Anniversary
12+
LIMITED EDITION NOT FOR RESALE
SEGA
[ASTRO CITY MINI] IF YOU WERE WONDERING ABOUT THAT SEVENTH COPY OF VIRTUA FIGHTER, IT'S ON THE ASTRO CITY MINI.
JACKY
WIN
29"23
ROUND 3

[DREAMCAST] IS IT SHAMEFUL TO ADMIT TO BEING A JACKY PLAYER? YEAH, PROBABLY. SORRY ABOUT THAT.
FREE PLAY
JACKY
LION
LAU
AOI
KAGE
SARAH
AS YOU MIGHT EXPECT, MARVEL'S ADAPTATION OF VIRTUA FIGHTER APPLIES PLENTY OF CREATIVE LICENCE TO THIN SOURCE MATERIAL.
MOST OF MY VIRTUA FIGHTER GAMES ARE HERE – YES, I KNOW I NEED TO GET THE PS2 VERSION OF VIRTUA FIGHTER 2.
BEST ITEM IN MY VIRTUA FIGHTER COLLECTION? EASILY A COPY OF THE ORIGINAL GAME, SIGNED BY DIRECTOR YU SUZUKI.
[SATURN] HERE'S JACKY TAKING A PASTING FOR BALANCE, FROM THE ONLY VIRTUA FIGHTER GAME WITH CHARACTER ENDINGS.
WHAT'S TRULY INSANE IS THAT VIRTUA FIGHTER KIDS: GG PORTRAIT PAI ALSO EXISTS, AND I'LL PROBABLY BUY IT.
SOME RELATED GOODIES, INCLUDING THE ANIME DVDS AND BLU-RAY, AS WELL AS THE FIRST GAME'S OFFICIAL SOUNDTRACK.

VIRTUA VIEWS

Readers share their thoughts on the Virtua Fighter series

Richard Jacques

VF2 on the Saturn was amazing. There is a great deal of character depth (look at when they introduced Shun Di for example). It takes many days/weeks to master each characters' moves rather than just button mashing. Many post pub and kebab games were played after work (at Sega!).

The Dark Room

Virtua Fighter felt incredible the first time I played it, and then *Tekken* happened. It's still beautiful, but it was never as funny, violent, involved or fun to look at as its competitors. But at least I don't feel lobotomised like when I play *Dead Or Alive*!

Justin Boot

VF4 was one of my favourite PS2 fighting games. I played tons of games due to being a reviewer in that era, so that's not something I say lightly. It had everything; challenging but fun, beautiful graphics, etc. I didn't get the chance to play the earlier games until much later.

DiGi Valentine

It has some of the best animations in the genre, it's fluid and fun to play, but it just lacks appeal for single-players and casuals. As expressive as these characters are they lack purpose for why they're fighting. Basic Arcade endings would be a good start, if not a Story Mode.

Llama King

Love it. When the first one came out it was a breath of fresh air not having to dodge fireballs and things. It was so smooth and doing a nice combo felt very satisfying.

Shadow Ice Cream Truck

While so much can be said about *Virtua Fighter*, its legacy can be distilled into a simple description: the first truly great 3D game.

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

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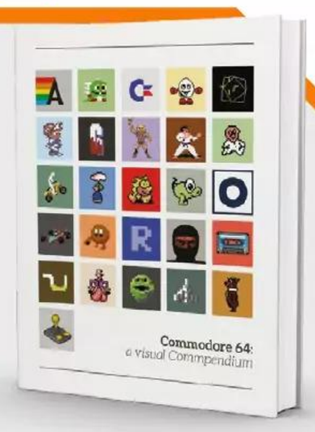
Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of one of our classic retro books. Good luck everyone!

STAR LETTER

BOOK SMART



» Keeping to a system can generally catch a wider audience than any individual game.

Hi Iain,

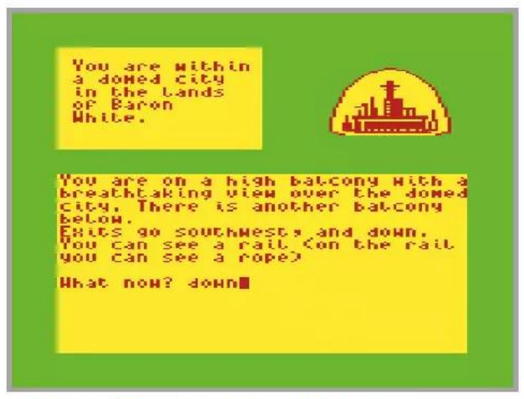
I read your piece 'Watch What You Do' in issue 261 and just wanted to share how much it resonated. You even awoke a lost memory about the water puzzle games – so thanks for that. I can't help but wonder though: did the person who invented that (because someone *did* invent it) think they were doing a service to the world for kids who didn't have access to a Game Boy, or were they just on the payroll of some corporation that has long since folded? Maybe it's a bit of both.

If I could be so bold, can I ask **Retro Gamer**'s advice with something? I've noticed a huge rise in gaming print media. I subscribe to **Retro Gamer**, but I also buy a lot of publications from Bitmap Books and others. A lot of the weightier tomes cover time periods or systems, but never individual games. Is this a licensing issue? Are there different legal issues to consider when publishing media around a single IP, rather than a collection of games or a system?

Kyle Campbell

We never really considered the thing about the water puzzles, and it's a good question, Kyle. As for single IP books, we've seen the likes of Bitmap Books' officially licensed *Metal Slug* book, but you're right to note that they're less common. We're not lawyers, but while there are potential legal pitfalls we'd say that it's more likely to be a matter of keeping the audience as broad as possible. Many retro-gaming books are funded through Kickstarter, and they tend to attract anything from 500-5,000 backers – if your topic is too narrow, you run the risk of an unsuccessful campaign.

» A *Contra* book alone might sell, but you'll catch that crowd by covering the whole genre.


You are within a domed city in the lands of Baron White.
You are on a high balcony with a breathtaking view over the domed city. There is another balcony below.
Exits go southwest and down.
You can see a rail. (on the rail you can see a rope)
What now? down

» [Dragon 32] Mark enjoyed Wintersoft games like *Juxtaposition* – did you have fun with them too?

IS WINTER COMING?

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I know I'm a bit late but congratulations on reaching your 20th anniversary, I still remember the day back in 2004 walking into a newsagent and seeing issue one and thinking, "That looks like an interesting read." It's a testament to all the staff and writers that you are still going strong today.

The reason for contacting you is to ask if you have done an article on Wintersoft, I don't recall ever seeing anything about them. I remember a couple of excellent games they produced for the Dragon 32 – *The Ring Of Darkness* and *Juxtaposition*, I spent far too many hours lost in these games.

Keep up the good work, looking forward to the next 20 years!

Mark Bostock

Many thanks, it's been a joy to reach that milestone, Mark. We can certainly try to look back at Wintersoft – it may take a bit of detective work to track down the developers though, as it doesn't look like their stay in the industry was a long one.

DIGITAL DELIGHT

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

As a long-time subscriber and an even longer-time reader (since the change to Imagine Publishing), I have a bit of a confession to make. From around my late-30s (I'm 48 now), my eyesight wasn't quite what it used to be, so I started to find it a bit of a struggle reading the relatively small text that you'd find in a printed publication – even with suitable glasses. This deterred me from reading my monthly subscription and now I have what literally is, over a hundred issues of the magazine that have never been removed from their plastic seal (around ten year's worth I would hazard).

Can you imagine my utter delight when I recently got your email about full access to your entire digital library (I have no idea if this is new for **Retro Gamer**; if it's not, it's never been brought to my attention)? I can now magnify the pages to my heart's content. To catch up, I plan to read two issues per month – the newly released issue and a past issue. It'll be kind of like reading a 'retro' **Retro Gamer**, if you see what I mean. Using this ratio, I should be up to date in about 2034. Keep up the magnificent work, team.

James Jessop

Thank you so much for continuing to support the magazine in spite of the difficulties you've had reading it, and we're delighted to hear

» We hadn't realised that the digital library would help readers like James, but we're really pleased it has.

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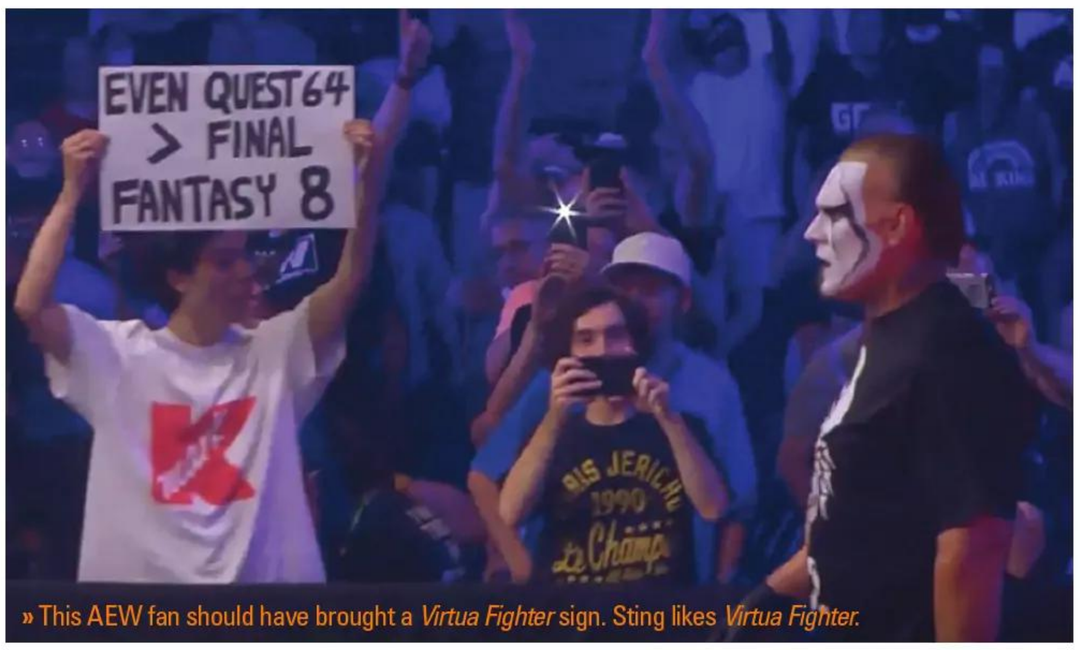

» This AEW fan should have brought a *Virtua Fighter* sign. Sting likes *Virtua Fighter*.

that you're now able to enjoy it again thanks to the digital issue library. This is indeed a new perk that we've added for subscribers this year. We do sometimes get feedback about readability and have made adjustments to the print magazine based on that – for example, we increased text sizes in the magazine in 2022 – but this will be very useful to know for readers who need additional help.

SIGN OF THE TIMES

Hi team,

I'm sure you must have seen this weird trend in wrestling by now, where fans keep bringing signs to shows that have controversial takes on retro games. Some of them are actually sort of related to the show, like one that said "MJF has the *Hello Kitty* Dreamcast" but a lot of them just say stuff like "*Final Fantasy 8* is filth" or "*Kingdom Hearts* is not that complicated." I find it all pretty amusing, but it's kind of baffling too – why is there such a big crossover between wrestling audiences and fans of old games? Nick's a wrestling fan, so surely he has some idea?

Dave Greene

It's certainly an odd trend Dave, and it seems mostly to just be people responding to each other or trying to get their signs featured on Botchamania. The crossover appeal makes sense though, as wrestlers like Xavier Woods and Adam Cole have built substantial followings by gaming on Twitch and YouTube. Besides, with their exaggerated personas and outlandish moves, wrestlers are like videogame characters in their own right. Oh, and we're jealous of MJF if that's true.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Shifting Setups

Darran's been having a major clear-out in his shed, rearranging things and adding more storage to better organise what's there – even his arcade cabinet is going. He's also framed his N64 posters and bought some lovely *The Last Of Us* canvases. Meanwhile, Nick has been struggling with a growing repair backlog as his component video switcher and his PS2 have both suffered power supply failures – the latter with a *Wrestlemania X-7* DVD stuck inside.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What was your first MMORPG experience?

» [PC] *EverQuest* is among the many MMORPGs readers have enjoyed.

Raid Guardian (Broken) (Flawed)
I played *EverQuest* from the beginning but when *Ruins Of Kunark* came out, I no-lifed the game!

guttertrash
EverQuest, played it like a job in 2000, phone line constantly jammed, ping of 10,000, no idea what to do and it was amazing.

Ana Lu
I first tried playing online in *Nox*. But after a few respawns I knew for sure it was not for me.

Luke The Fox VA
I started out with *Runescape* with a mate of mine. First day I went into the wilderness (wildy) and got instantly killed. Noob mistake.

Luke Middleham
I dabbled in *World Of Warcraft*. Had a big push at *Final Fantasy XIV* last year, but it just never seemed to get going. So my greatest MMO moment is still Leeeeeeroy Jenkins!

Adam Sharples
Anarchy Online was my first dip into the genre. Brilliant game with some memorable music and environments. Dial-up in those days meant you were disconnected after two hours. Great times.

Good Noise
It was *Asheron's Call*. Winter of 1999, I saw the box at MicroCenter and bought it knowing nothing. I didn't know I was in for a 17-year ride! So many great friends and epic memories. I miss it to this day.

Martin Lindell
Ultima Online on ADSL in 2000. Quests were quite mundane, go to a cave etc, but the idea of other real players moving around in the world was exciting. I quickly got bored and wanted immersive SP players where I can explore at my own pace.

Robert August de Meijer
Folks sharing stories about *Ultima Online* at my game store. I was too young to join, but my sparked imagination alone was epic!

retro GAMER

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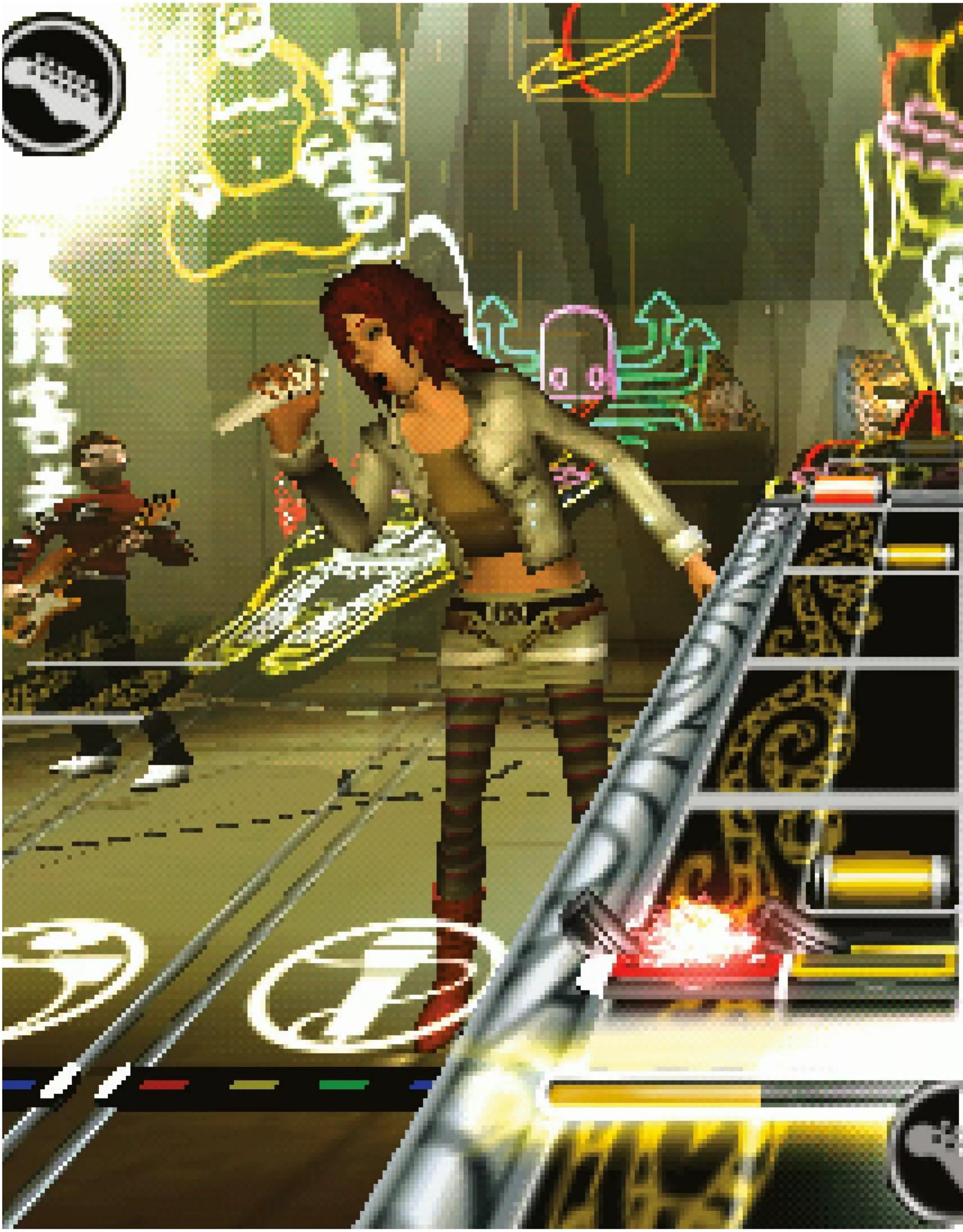


Rock Band Unplugged

WHO NEEDS PLASTIC PERIPHERALS?

» PLAYSTATION PORTABLE » 2009 » HARMONIX, BACKBONE ENTERTAINMENT

Sony's portable handheld has a number of excellent music-focussed games, from *Lumines* and the *Patapon* series, to overseas exclusives like *Taiko No Tatsujin Portable* and *DJMax Portable*. One of my favourites however is *Rock Band Unplugged*, a harmonious collaboration between Harmonix and Backbone Entertainment.

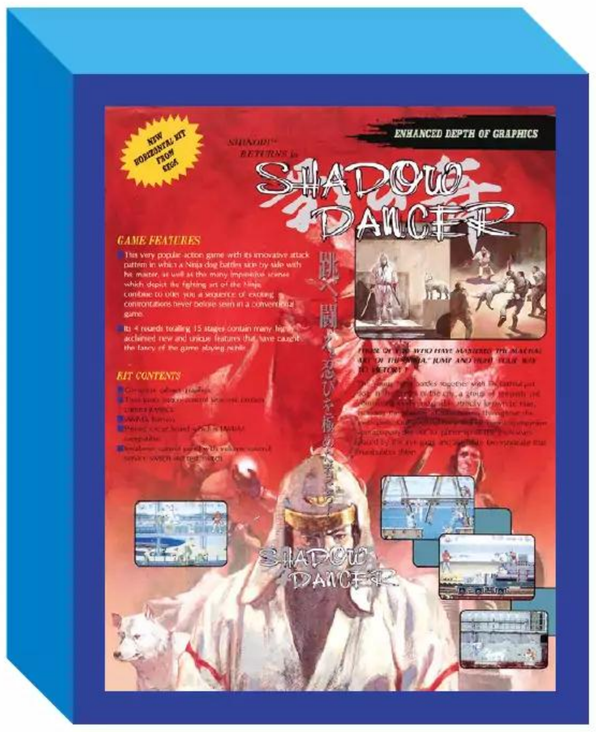
Knowing that plastic peripherals wouldn't be a good fit for Sony's PSP, Harmonix and Backbone instead focussed on channelling the gameplay mechanics of Harmonix's earlier hits *Frequency* and *Amplitude*. The end result is an incredibly successful transition with the d-pad and face buttons focussing on hitting beats while the shoulder buttons let you skip between instruments.

The *Rock Band* series has always been famed for its excellent licensed soundtracks and *Unplugged* is no different with 41 master recordings ranging from The Smashing Pumpkins' *Today* to *Message In A Bottle* by The Police. The game was also well supported by a large amount of downloadable content with the library nearly reaching 60 additional tracks before the in-game shop was inevitably shut down. That closure led to me encountering my first hurdle upon replaying it recently.

When the PSP Go was released it came with a voucher that gave you access to five songs to play with *Rock Band Unplugged Lite*, a greatly diminished version of the game that pushed you towards buying DLC instead. I ended up buying nearly 20 extra music tracks. Unfortunately, I only downloaded a fraction onto my PSP 3000 at the time and it's now virtually impossible to regain access to games you've legitimately purchased because you can no longer transfer games from your PS3 to PSP and you need to otherwise hobble your router's security in order to get the PSP online.

Fortunately, the internet provides and all the game's DLC is currently preserved online, so I was able to easily reacquire my purchased tracks – it's just a shame I had to jump through so many hoops to get them. It was worth the hassle though, as playing through REM's *Losing My Religion* and Radiohead's *My Iron Lung* on Hard difficulty is great fun, even if I can't manage a full five stars whenever I tackle them. Who knows, one day I might even tackle Expert mode. ✱

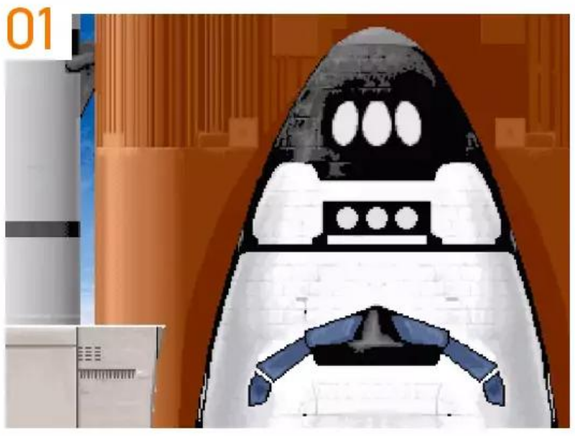
ENDGAME



SHADOW DANCER

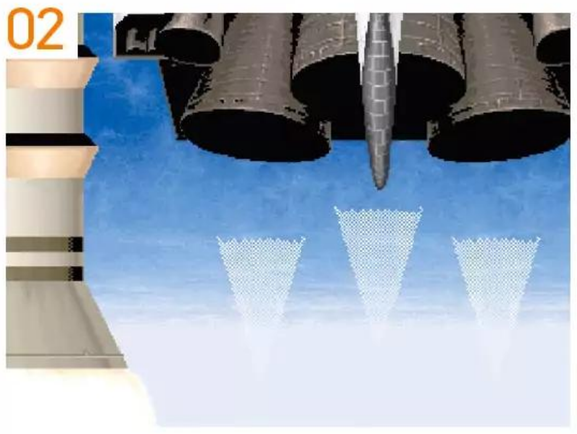
» The funny thing about *Shinobi*'s only arcade sequel is that the game never really makes it clear who you're playing as. Is it Joe Musashi? Various conversions have different takes on that question. All we know is that this ninja has a dog, and that dog is enough to help him prevent the terrorists from detonating a bunch of Time Bombs. But what's the ultimate goal?

01



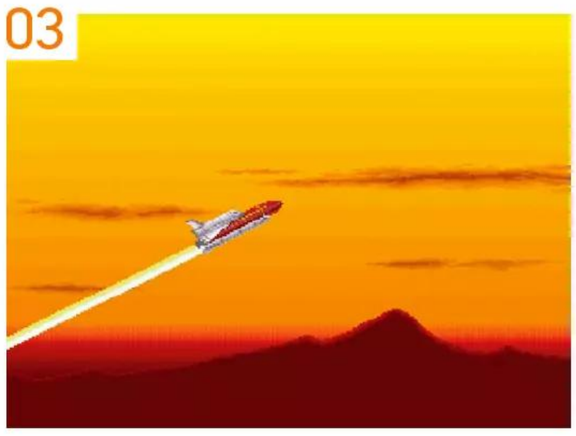
» After a surprisingly anti-climactic battle, our protagonist beats a hasty retreat so that he might avoid being burnt to a crisp in the space shuttle launch that his narrow victory has enabled.

02



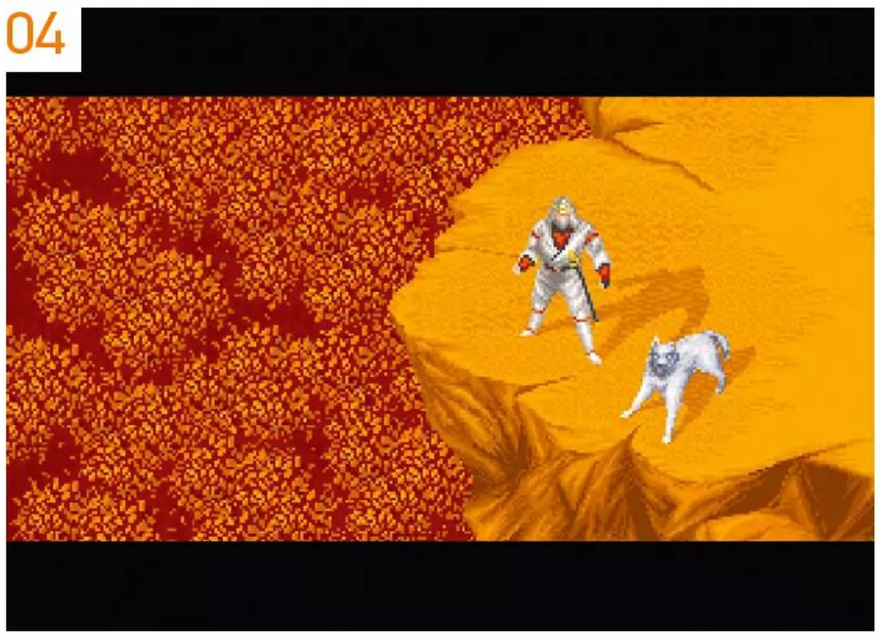
» Up, up and away! He's not actually sure what this space mission is intended to achieve, but it has to be something good, right? He probably should have checked that out beforehand. Silly!

03



» Well, no use thinking about it now anyway. The rocket is already streaking across the glorious sunset sky, and there's nothing he can do to change the fact that it's still going to carry the shuttle into orbit.

04



» In an attempt to think about something – anything – other than the remote possibility of having inadvertently enabled villainous shenanigans, our ninja decides that it's time to crack a joke. Looking up into the sky with his canine companion, he shouts, "Good boy! Fetch!"

05

» The dog silently turns to the ninja, letting the stink of that joke hang in the air momentarily. Carrying him through the game? Fine. Being left out of the final boss battle? Insulting. That cheap gag, though? When they get home, the ninja will be cleaning dog mess out of the tatami mats.

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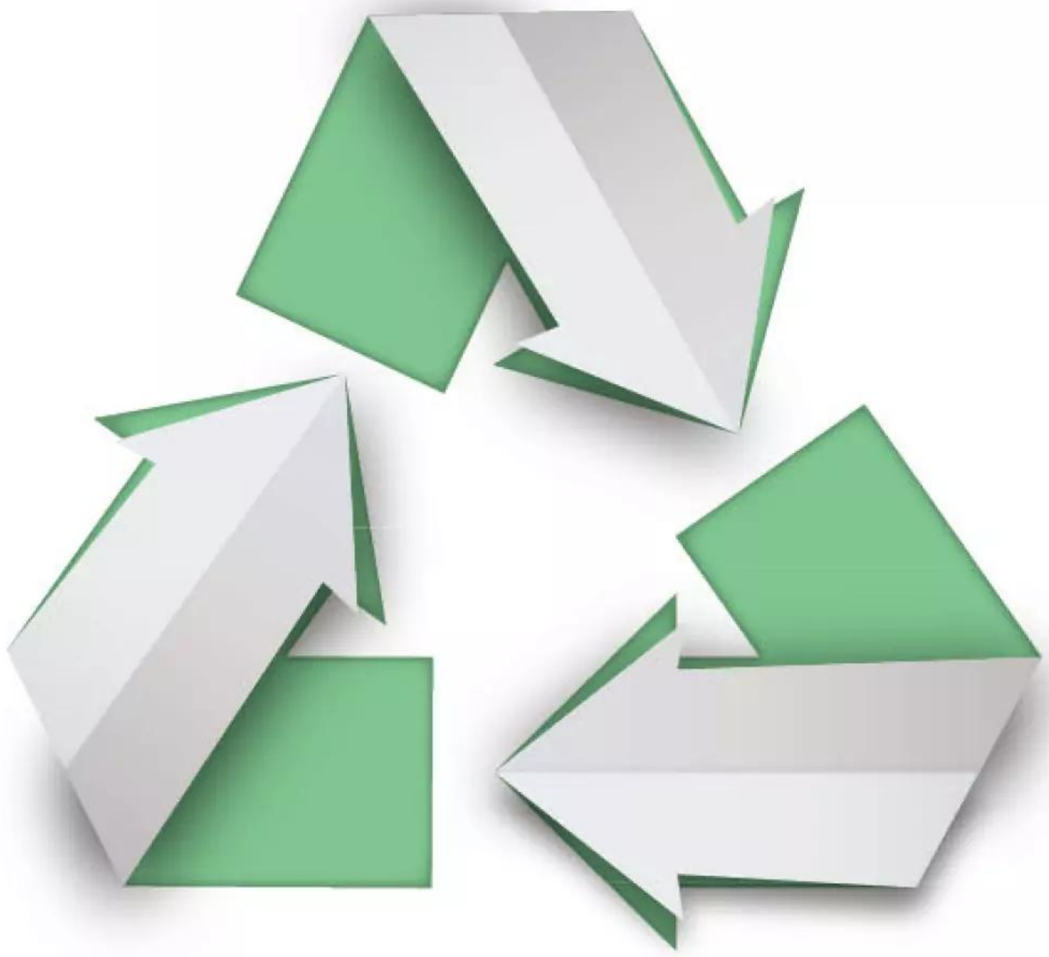

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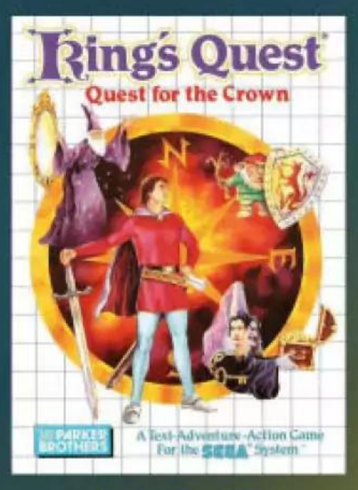

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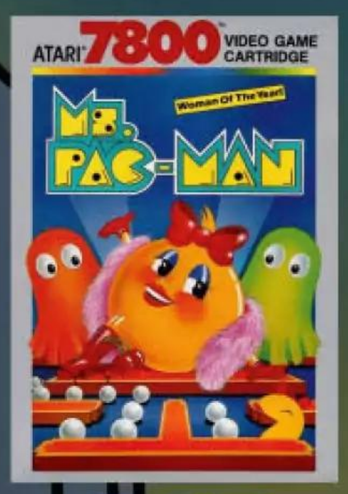

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